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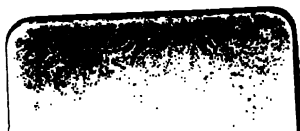
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THREE HOUSEHOLD POETS:

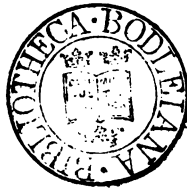
VIZ.—

MILTON, COWPER, BURNS.

With an Introduction on Poetry and Song.

BY

JOHN TOMLINSON.



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1869.

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P R E F A C E.

DURING the year 1849, a skeleton of all these papers, except the Conversation on Milton, appeared in the *Mirror Magazine*. Twenty years have passed away, and the question arises, Supposing the sketches were ever worth printing, have they any signification now? The times are changed, for society would now laugh at a man who embodied poetry as the chief purpose of life. Now scarcely anything is read, except the newspaper, the sensational novel, or some highly-coloured article in a favourite magazine. Standard authors, and books of poetry in particular, lie neglected on the shelves. It is so—the spirit of the age has changed. Half a century ago, and later, we could scarcely travel inside a stagecoach, or on the deck of a steamboat, without noticing that our companion was engrossed with a well-thumbed pocket edition of his favourite bard. Now, people of any social pre-

tensions would blush with shame to be publicly caught enjoying anything so vulgar as an old book of poems. Since young ladies scorn to wear a bonnet which had been the rage six weeks ago, (for there is a psychological history in dress), and man's adherence to any public leader may not be calculated upon for three months in succession, so the rage for literary novelty engenders hot-bed productions, pandering to the ephemeral taste of the day.

There is a cynical air in the reader's face while he delivers his bile thus : "True poetry is always nectar to a healthy taste, or rather, like good wine, age does but enhance its value ; but prosing about poetry—Pah ! [spitting out]—that is a very different beverage." Be charitable and reasonable, sir ; the human race are not all like yourself, of full literary stature. During the first twenty years of my life, that season when we live most upon imagination, I could not have enjoyed Homer's *Iliad*, and would have felt much weariness in being obliged to read ten consecutive pages of the *Æneid* ; but I could heartily relish my monthly *Blackwood*—the glorious *Blackwood* of old Christopher North !—and even appreciate Homer or Virgil through those admirable paraphrases on different translators. I have known men in the meridian of life who could never

read a hundred lines of standard verse except as a task ; and yet, on all practical matters, they would exhibit an exquisite sensibility and refined taste, showing clearly that they had the stuff in them out of which poets are made. "Poets are born, not made," says the old adage, and it may be that no amount of discipline can give *some men* a true appreciation of poetry ; but, reader, never trust these latter persons with either your honour or your money, at least, not without requiring a just bond for the due performance of ordinary contracts.

DONCASTER, *June* 1869.

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**INTRODUCTION ON POETRY AND
SONG.**

INTRODUCTION ON POETRY AND SONG.


THE question has often been asked, "What is poetry?" On hearing it put for the first time, one is ready to exclaim, "Oh, there is nothing more simple—that which is evident to every man's perception cannot surely be difficult to define." Reflecting, however, for a moment, we discover that the answer is not so easily supplied, for the true and full signification lies hidden in the inner nature of all that is noble, and beautiful, and good. Coleridge defines poetry thus: "An art (or whatever better term our language may afford) by representing in words external nature and human thoughts and affections, by the production of as much immediate pleasure in parts as is compatible with that larger sum of pleasure in the whole." According to this theory, poetry is metre, and melody is simply a pleasing expression. I do not regard this as a complete, nor even as a correct definition. If, indeed, all poetry be pleasure, it is equally certain that all pleasure is not poetry. Is poetry merely a unity of

symbols and sounds, a collection of tropes and metaphors, in systematically constructed verse? No; however necessary these may be to its permanent embodiment, they are but the casket which encloses the divine gift, or rather the vehicles through which the sacred influence is conveyed. Poetry is the divinity which stirs within us, the impulses which develop the holy and the great, the life-blood of a spiritual existence. Reader, did you ever experience within a consciousness of great purposes and lofty hopes? Did you ever perceive the life which is in you irradiating immortal vigour? In calm meditation, was the conviction ever brought with power to the mind that life is a serious thing? Many a time. Well, cherish such; they are the glimmerings of poetry. And you have had many a precious quaff of pure intellectual joy? "I don't know how it is," you say, "but a sudden exuberance of feeling sometimes flits into the soul, as if a drop of ethereal joy had descended fresh from its native heaven. It may be transient, but it is glorious; and the mind, like an encaged bird tired of its prison-house, longs to fly away to the true Elysian groves." This inspiration is a fickle, fitful thing, and cannot be made subject to our will. What exquisite emotions are at times awakened as we view some enchanting landscape, illumined by a rising or a setting sun; but the landscape is ever the same, the sun daily rises and sets; and yet sometimes we look upon the scenes with rapture, and sometimes with unconcern. How is it? What are those perceptions of beauty and delight, and

from whence do they spring? They are instinctive workings of the poetic faculty. It is true, inspiration may, to some extent, be excited and directed by external influences. There are situations in life which engender the deepest sympathies, and give rise to emotions the most tender and sublime. Let some sudden reverse blast or reduce our joys, how wistfully the mind broods over its departed blessings, how busy imagination is with our future prospects, blurring and blotting out from the page of existence the bright characters of hope. Let a friend—a real friend—be torn from us by death, the very fountain of the soul's sympathies appears to be riven up; the mind, like a shattered bark, is driven to struggle with the torrent of violent emotions. And yet, many of our choicest spirits are almost daily brought under the influence of such circumstances; how is it, then, that more of this engrained sensibility is not embodied in the literature of the times? The truth is, it generally happens that our deepest emotions, although they prove a future treasury of rich experiences, present at the moment insuperable barriers to their more permanent embodiment. Nor is this to be wondered at. When men are sensible of emotions like those alluded to, the desire to communicate them is far away. Men feel at such times that a scientific expression is incompatible with real sorrow. When the heart is rent, and every source fails in comfort—when all earthly joy is seen through the medium of an idol and lost,—to talk, then, of nicely constructed sentences and elegance of style, would be to mock their grief. Our ideas

and emotions, however, when once engendered, are never lost. Much, perhaps all, true poetry had an embryotic existence in the experience of the past. "Poetry," says Wordsworth, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity. The emotion is contemplated, until, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kin to that which was before the subject of contemplation is produced in the mind." To embody emotion, therefore, imagination draws upon the repositories of the past. In this sense, poetry may be called a making, or creation, as the term signifies, for it works up the materials of the soul's laboratories.


An influence awakening emotion steals upon us from without. Is it from without? Phenomena says, "It is not in us, ours is but a material existence. We have beauty and life, but no spiritual assimilation." The mystery lies here, namely, the reaction of this material beauty upon susceptible human minds. Such emotional conditions afford material for poetry, which the intellect organises, and art embodies. We thus feel that our being is more than phenomena. And yet, who among us is not dubious about death? It is so strange, that we can carry our emotional nature where there are no familiar objects of sense. But that which is material and sensuous in us will die; the flowers die, and all things change. . . . To give minutely the form, colour, and dimensions of external objects, will be accurate description, and yet the emotional nature may not



be awakened thereby. To seize upon some nebulous simile floating in the mind, moulding it into a pretty conceit, but without referring the image to its prototype in nature, is also not true teaching, since from this method arises a great medley of incongruous images. Every versifier, blest with a teeming fancy, should study nature closely; otherwise, although he may shine as a sparkling similiser, he will never become a true poet. Moreover, to aspire after the grand and picturesque is not always the right way, for if the mind be sensitive in repose, like an iodysed plate, external objects will print their own photograph. The true poet does not wander from home with a fixed determination to become ecstatic; he does not say to himself, "I will take a walk and fetch me inspiration;" he is guided or charmed irresistibly by voices which only claim a sympathetic auditor. Not always in her grandeur and magnificence will nature speak to us. At times, indeed, the whole scene kindles into beauty, combining pleasures. It seems, then, as if everything was emulous to teach, as if a thousand tongues would speak at once, or rather, chant in mingled song. Then let the soul realise those mysterious harmonies, reassured by faith that such pleasures shall recur at intervals for evermore. But these are rare seasons. More frequently the wide landscape, with far-stretching hills supporting the clouds, lies in unconsciousness, while attention is engrossed by some curious, gnarled oak, or a stagnant pond, fringed with green grass (so much deeper in colour than that of the adjoining field), where the frogs

croak out their fancies in that same Egyptian dialect they used in Pharaoh-land. Then the eye reposes on the turf, where the white and yellow flowers live together in love, and the lily (quite in the shade) emits its fragrance under the thorn-bush. Do not rich experiences hover round the most familiar things, impressing us with a conviction that there is nothing mean?

But the poetic faculty may exist apart from either the knowledge or exercise of metrical composition. Poetry in its widest sense, includes all those purifying, elevating, enrapturing aspirations which the soul offers on the shrine of the beautiful and the good. The spirit of poetry never rests upon a scene without blessing it. Poetry is the sun of social life, carrying happiness and amelioration in every gleam. It is one of Heaven's common blessings—not a monopoly, given not for the exclusive enjoyment of a class. Who has not felt, under some circumstance of life, the well-spring of poetry gushing up from the heart? What is that which swells in the mother's breast as she gazes in tenderness on the face of her infant as it lies smiling in its dreams? It is the poetry of maternal love. What causes the tear to start in that fair one's eyes when she contrasts her former condition—her drunken husband, her abject penury, her hours of woe, with the partner and comforts she has now? It is the poetry of gratitude for a home restored. Poetry rules the world; the aspirations of the gifted are woven into the spirit of all times. Do we want enkindled an impulse for a mighty



undertaking, we fly to the pages of the bard; do we want an opiate for the bitterness of grief, we instil the soothing balm from the flowers of poetry.

Were we to believe some people, we might almost infer that poetry is getting out of fashion; as if, like a periodical visitor, she was a thing of times and seasons. Poetry is not one of the arts induced solely by civilisation, its existence is coeval with the soul. Yes, we may fairly assume that the poetic element did exist in primitive times. More than this, in those early stages of society there might, possibly, be a greater vitality in the emotional man: then poetry would flourish like a perpetual spring. Some one may say, "No, all embodied poetry is the result of culture; it was by observing the recurrence of certain forms of harmony, that metrical distinctions grew into arbitrary rules. As it was impossible to think, save within the prescribed bounds of language, so it is inevitable that beautiful emotions will find a harmonious vehicle of development." Perhaps so; but I would glance backward to a period before poetry was embodied—before versification was cultivated as an art. Essential poetry—that which was developed without effort in its instinctive life—existed only in the associations which gave it birth. Like some sweet tone of *Æolian* harp awakened by the passing wind, it has for a moment a tangible existence, then merges into the great world-matter of concealed harmonies. I know its effects live with us in future times, and that memory delights to recall the impressions. I admit that, by words and symbols, an image may be em-

bodied which shall remain for all time, which shall awaken kindred emotions in the experience of thousands. But this is not the primal effulgence—it is but a distant irradiation of the poet's glory. I say, then, that those direct missions to the soul—be they early, or be they late—are the true inspiration, and that they alone have a special, individual expression. There is a poetry of childhood, the memory of which is like a blissful dream. The suggestive incidents out of which it sprang, may seem to us now the merest trifles; but herein consists the great secret of its charm—the emotion was genuine. It was thus in the infancy of the world, among people who had no organised principles of taste. Their life was reality. Truth is ever beautiful, while all imitation is guile. It is not by accumulated experience, or large technical knowledge, but from a want of simplicity, which is a departure from truth, that poetry declines. I like not to meditate upon the present aspects of verse, for the voices of modern poets are but conventional sounds. He is the popular idol, not who is conscious of inherent power, but who best appropriates the prevailing forms and prejudices of his age. Of the hundreds who this very year are perpetrating verse, there are not ten righteous men.

But if the mutations of poetry represent the national heart—and they certainly do—then is the poet a true historian, since he embodies not only the various characteristics, but the essential capacity of his age. The inspiration of the poet takes its text from those national impulses which are strug-

gling for development. Our own maudlin, cringing, trimming, incoherent muse, as truly reflects the social condition of England, as did that heroism, daring enterprise, high-toned friendship, fierce hate and lust, and insatiable revenge, represent the times of Homer. In reading Homer, we trace the earliest record (excepting the Bible) of man and human society. This fact must be kept prominently in mind, or we shall miss the chief interest of the poet; for it would be incongruous, in estimating the narrative, to carry with us all the recurring prejudices of three thousand years. The Homeric age had more grit in its expression, character was more strongly and truthfully developed; for is it not apparent that our super-refined modes and appliances of art—often paramount in their influences—dilute and disguise the thought? And yet, an impression is very common, that to appreciate Homer, one must have a cultivated taste; the masses, it is said, do not read the grand old bard with appreciation and delight. Then they cannot read any bard with understanding and pleasure, because poetry is spiritually discerned. It is difficult to creep out of present associations and prejudices—they form our modes of thought, and determine our very judgment—else we might even now live with that primitive race bodily upon the earth. What a history of the physical sublime in man and his divinities! Beings of impetuous feeling, stalwart and brave, of bold imagination, luxuriating in sense, but scarcely tinged with intellectual or moral refinement. And yet, how unlike fiction are Homer's

heroes. We recognise the great humanity in other and bolder phases of development; so truthfully does it speak to all that is lofty in sensuous man. To such readers, although society has changed and is changeful, there will for ever be life like the breath of nature in Homer's poems. But, the reader will say, we miss in ancient poetry elements which only Christianity can supply. Their divinities and examplers were only exaggerated types of humanity, with the passions and pleasures of sense exalted in degree. Where are those aspirations after a spiritual existence, those feelings of mysterious awe in contemplation of what is pure and holy? Nowhere to be found. The old Pagan world never opened that great fountain of love; and amidst the splendour of imposing rites, faith had no place where to rest. Christianity has created new and vital elements in our experience; for the ancient world left a great blank yet to be filled up. To them the large heart of nature never smiled benignantly in redemption; we miss that broad spirit of benevolence which now pervades and unites all, assimilating noble affection with the meanest thing.

“For the great God who rules above
He made and loveth all.”

But irrespective of ages, and circumstances, and peoples, the poet's mission is always new. The bard of Chios has entranced the world for three thousand years, and, as with our own immortal Shakespeare, the stronger the intimacy the more he is beloved. It is a beautiful mythology that poetry was born

amidst the stars, and that when man first turned his gaze upward, and toward that celestial world, she was infused into the soul in the dew of heaven. Now it is natural to infer, that in the primitive ages the expression or language of poetry would inevitably partake of the nature of the passion itself. Were it ardent, lofty, sublime, it would develop itself in hyperbole, or in bold and striking metaphor; were it tender, plaintive, subdued, the diction would be sober, nervous, graceful. This expression, being induced by extraordinary impulses, would stand out as something distinct from the natural and regular oral communication; and thus, by exciting more strongly the attention, would be easily fixed in the memory. It was then that poetry was the native unadorned language of the soul; men did not, as in later times, strain after its acquirement, or cultivate it as an elegant profession; "they mused, the fire burned, then spake they with the tongue." Here one is almost tempted to infer that in the earliest ages poetry would possess more vital, uncorrupted energy, than during any later period of refinement. Untutored the strains might be, and wild, but they truthfully uttered the language of the heart. As I have observed, those occasional and spontaneous bursts of sentiment would be treasured up with the recollection of their effects; but it was not until society was considerably advanced, that poetry was studied as an art. Then arose the bard—imagination and emotion were embodied in measured cadences and harmonious verse. Then music was born. It is said that the birds taught man to sing;

I should rather say it was the melody within him which first awakened the "mystery of sweet sounds," for without poetry, music could never have existed. What is music itself but the emotions of the soul melting into harmony? Dr Johnson once defined it "the most agreeable kind of noise," which would be true enough were it not for the poetry—the living, breathing influence which dwells within. The elements of music are indigenous. Amongst all nations, and in all times, some peculiar melody or rhythm is observed in the expression of tender and powerful emotions. In proportion as the feeling or sentiment is beautiful, will the modulation accord with certain agreeable sensations of fitness, which we denominate taste. In the primitive condition of society the bard was a popular oracle, the very life and energy of the tribe; and never was the influence of song so great. Let us wander back in imagination to a barbarous age:—It is evening, and the fire blazes high; they prepare the feast, and as the wine passes freely round, loud is the call for the bard. Soon, with harp in hand, he is seated on an old gray stone—he loves the harp, and as his fingers sweep along the strings, a chord within vibrates to the sound, memory dwells on the fame of the hero—he recounts his exploits in impassioned verse. Or it is the time of sacrifice; under the shadow of a gigantic oak, stands the altar, and around it are gathered the chief and his warriors, old men, and maidens, and little children. In the circle, and elevated above the rest, is the bard; as the smoke of the victim rises curling toward heaven,

his heart quivers with emotion—low and solemn are the strains he pours, until appears the sign that the gods are propitiated, when he strikes with wild and vigorous hand the strings, and they dance exulting round the expiring embers. Or perhaps the signal of war has gone forth—again none so active as the bard. Filled with impassioned ardour himself, he infuses the same spirit of enthusiasm in the clans, and ere the sound of the harp has died away, they rush in frenzy to the battle. Before the art of writing, all instruction was communicated through the medium of poetry or song; historical events were woven into a people's tradition in the form of poetry, and even the laws and usages of tribes were chanted to the sound of the lyre. No doubt the instrument of sound, the form and structure of the verse, the character of the tune or melody, were each alike simple; but their very simplicity, by descending to the tastes and condition of the people, made them peculiarly adapted as the vehicles of emotion. Never in later refined stages of music and poetry was the influence more deeply and extensively felt. If we had not the testimony of history, our own observation would assert the truth of this. How frequently will a simple, heartfelt song melt an audience into tears, or rouse a nation's passions, where the whole range of operatic music, or the epic productions of our first spirits would fail to produce an impression. Within the entire sphere of poetry, nothing is calculated to produce effects more general and lasting than lyrical pieces set to music, or songs. Partly from the short, terse, epigrammatic expression of the

sentiments, and partly from their association with simple melodies, the mind is greatly facilitated in imbibing and retaining songs. The influence is universal under all circumstances and at all times, when there exists neither power nor inclination to follow more elaborate compositions. We meet with some fine lyrics and short pastorals in our old English dramatists. Simple and quaint they are, seeming to come out of nature like sweets from a flower. Moreover, there is such an individuality in the sentiment, that what the knight or swain said, and "what the gentle ladie did," mellowed existence for a long time.

"Thus the shepherd woo'd :—

Thou art too elfish, faith thou art ; too elfish and too coy ;
Am I, I pray thee, beggarly, that such a flock enjoy ?
Believe me, lass, a king is but a man, and so am I,
Content is worth a monarchy, and mischiefs hit the high."

What a deep subtle pathos there is in the following—

"Lay a garland on my hearse
Of the dismal yew ;
Maidens willow branches bear,
Say, I died true ;

My love was false, but I was firm
From my hour of birth ;
Upon my buried body lie
Lightly, gentle earth."

Take another example—one of these simple old lyrics which are worth a thousand jingling songs—

"Trim thy locks, look cheerfully ;
Fate's hidden ends eyes cannot see :

Joys as winged dreams fly fast ;
 Why should sadness longer last ?
 Grief is but a wound to woe ;
 Gentlest fair, mourn, mourn, no mo'."

There are certain prosaic souls who appear to regard the influences of music and poetry as simple intoxication. In effect they say thus :—"While narratives of fact once learnt are ever recurring to us as examples amid every circumstance of life, the power in poetry or music lives only in the present ; then, after it has temporarily soothed or elevated the mind, evanishes, leaving only the remembrance of ideal enjoyment." But such emotions may have induced a state of mind out of which springs not only earnest resolution, but true beneficial action. I grant that for the stern duties of life mere singing will not do ; there must be practical fruit—the liberal hand bringing help and succour, or lifting misery out of men's path. But so sure as Hood was the poor sempstress' advocate, when from that wide heart came forth the wail of its client's wretchedness, will the true lyrist always stimulate love and philanthropy.

As our strongest and deepest emotions arise, not as the result of thought and reflection, but suddenly, without premeditation, so do the influences of song. Requiring scarcely any effort of the mind to appreciate and enjoy them, their lessons are instilled imperceptibly, as it were ; thus they unfold and elevate the best faculties of our nature, while they minister to our recreation. But frequently lyrical pieces are doubly sacred from their associations with the past.


Who can listen, after many long years, to the song a mother or a sister sung, without feeling the chords of long-cherished affection vibrating in the soul? Who, a wanderer on a foreign shore, can listen to the strains of our national poetry without a vivid and heart-felt recurrence to "Auld Lang Syne?" Our emigrants, if they take nothing else, carry with them our favourite songs, which are incorporated into new commonwealths and new institutions; and their diffusion, by awakening old sympathies, echoes back a blessing on Albion. It is an old saying, and not devoid of truth, that the man who makes our national songs exercises a far greater power upon society than the statesman who frames our laws. Who will say that the world would have been the same if much of our lyrical poetry had not existed? Every ennobling sentiment thrown upon the world is another impetus in the cause of human progress. A happy, hopeful sonnet has many a time turned the tide of a nation's sympathies. More than once a song suiting the extremity of the times has inflamed the populace to madness, and performed an important part in overthrowing a dynasty. "But," you will say, "such effects belong to periods long gone by, ours is a more matter-of-fact and less musical age. Songs in our day have not much to do with revolutions." Have they not?—hark! what strains are those which come floating across the channel? It is the wild Marseillaise—

"To arms, to arms, ye brave!
The avenging sword unsheath!"

A feeling of enthusiasm seizes on the masses—their whole faculties seem leavened by the spirit of the song.* I remember some years ago, in the earlier period of Irish agitation, a grand national banquet was given to Daniel O'Connell by the friends and partisans of repeal. We all know the hold O'Connell had on the feelings of the people, and the magical effects attending some of his more violent harangues; but never, perhaps, did he engender a sensation more powerful and deep than he, together with the whole audience, were the subjects of at that banquet. During the proceedings of the evening, a gentleman favoured the company with a song—it was Moore's celebrated lyric, "O! where's the slave so lowly?" The singer appeared to catch the spirit of both the occasion and the song, and as the strains died away, the entire assembly was deeply moved. Daniel rose, and with his whole frame trembling with agitation, exclaimed, "Ay, where is he? I am not that slave." All my readers will remember the festival which was, some time ago, celebrated in Scotland to the memory of Burns—a tribute worthy alike the people and their bard. The muster place was chosen amidst scenes and objects memorable through the poet's song—it was a charming situation on the banks of the Doon: the monument of Burns stood close behind, while in the distance, peering above the trees, arose "Allo-way's Auld Haunted Kirk." On one side lay the town of Ayr, with the Avon mountains beyond, and

* These lines were printed in 1849, soon after the last French revolution.

opposite, the Carrick hills formed a bold relief to the eye. But it is not the scenery which now so much attracts, as the dense moving masses of living beings. On they come, file beyond file, in orderly procession; you would almost imagine that the towns and hamlets had completely disgorged themselves, and the whole community had agreed to do homage to their immortal bard. Listen! the shrill but pleasant sound of the bagpipe is faintly heard in the distance. Now the glittering lances and the waving banners are seen emerging from amongst the trees which skirt the Doon, and the immense procession winds round to the old bridge. On they come, the banks re-echoing to the sweetest music, and now they near the platform. First are the magistrates, town-council, and chief inhabitants of Ayr; after them a very numerous array of farmers, bonneted, and in their flowing plaids; beyond them are numerous clubs, trades, &c., each accompanied with a band of music. There were there the noble and the cottar, the high born dame, and maidens of the lowly hood and snood, the man of literary attainments, and he who has just learning enough to love and appreciate the bard. Burns's three sons were there, and his aged sisters. When the procession had defiled in front of the platform, every lance and banner was lowered, every head was uncovered, and for a few moments that immense concourse bent in solemn reverence, with nothing above them but the broad blue roof of heaven. Suddenly, amidst the deepest silence, one of the bands struck up that fine Scottish air, "Ye



banks and braes o' bonnie Doon." The effect was electrical; it seemed as if the spirit of their poet hovered round, dropping down inspiration—the key-note had been struck, and from eighty to one hundred thousand voices joined in the song—they sung until they wept.

It is not, however, in the crowd, or amidst the bustling scenes of life, that the power of song is most felt. Aodide is the goddess of social life, charming care away, cheering the soul in adversity, lifting, for a time at least, the dull oppressed mind above the troubles which surmount it. What a beautiful scene that is in the family circle when, the labours of the day over, the whole household ushers in the repose of evening by a spontaneous burst of song. Say, ye carping misanthrope, are not the affections of each other—nay, their very souls—blended together as harmoniously as their voices?

I love songs, and often sigh for the good old times when Ballad-singing was an institution. "Do you, hem! I don't," says Simon Sleek. "They did harm, very much harm." A great deal of harm to the spleen. The rich have all the facilities for music within their own homes, and can enjoy the rarest talent whenever it is their pleasure to pay for it; while the poor, who have, perhaps, as keen a musical appreciation, must steal snatches of such enjoyment as best they can. Like an earnest sermon or a wholesome tale, the ballad-singer, too, has his own particular mission in the world. For instance—'tis many years ago—we gather with a crowd in the street around two ballad-singers.

Mark them well. She looks with such a calm sweet gaze into his eyes, albeit they squint; he gazes so lovingly upon her face, quite heedless that the mouth is coarse and wide, while their full hearts pour forth a melting tale, anent the sorrows of one Dorothy Bell.

God sometimes gives a stray gift of genius to the poor. That young man might, perhaps, make very good shoes, but he feels that he can make very good melody; so when the lamps are lit, and the streets a little quiet, he seeks some suitable place, and there lifts up his voice, while his heart throbs with emotion, and the whole neighbourhood becomes vocal. All minds are influenced by the power of genius; it is because the singer possesses a divine gift that the crowds stop and listen to him. Where is the evil—if he gives them good and pleasurable feelings, why should they not give him bread? Whew! a Bobby arrives, with a stern sense of duty, and, strange fatality, because the singer does not escape through that entry and run, he goes for fourteen days to the tread-mill. A court of justice associates such vocation with the “rogue and the vagabond.” I have heard that Homer chanted his effusions in the streets of Chios, and that our ancient bards used frequently to sing under heaven’s canopy; but this was before tread-mills were invented: the ages improve.

Our street-singer comes upon us unexpectedly; the life-giving breeze, the voice of the nightingale, and the perfume of flowers, come in the same way. It is but rarely that we experience a pleasure we

have been anticipating; thus, many rush to a musical entertainment with elated expectations, and afterwards find that the true appreciation is absent: we go purposely to admire, and soon become tired by an attention to the magnificent. Sometimes, as if transcending the dull routine of events, the ballad-singer comes to us as a prophetic voice, so truly does it accord with the mood of our inner life, smoothing down the temporary acerbity of man's nature, or cheering a womanly spirit when almost drowned in despondency. Then is it not surprising that the polite world should almost invariably associate the idea of ballad-singing with debauchery? Is it imperative to connect street-music with a beggar's opera at some low lodging-house; ay, even while we are dealing out these coppers, see them helping the riot of travelling tinkers and prigs? Personally, I have an opinion of music, that its effects are humanising. None but a demon, as he hears the plaintive, warbling air, would spurn little Alice from his knee, lift his foot to kick old Towser, or eat his supper in the sulks. It is only those entirely depraved who are uninfluenced by songs; for the latter do not so much originate emotions as they reproduce by association every rich experience of the past.

Simon Sleek begins to yawn, and hopes I am not going to administer ethics.

There is in the ballads of olden time an irresistible charm of simplicity. One of the earliest I have met with dates back to the close of Henry the Third's reign,—

"Sumer is icumen in ;
 Lerude sing cuccu ;
 Groweth sed and bloweth med,
 And springeth the wde nu.
 Awe beteth after lamb ;
 Shouth after calve cu,
 Bulluc sterteth,
 Bucke verteth,
 Meerie sing cuccu.
 Wel singes thu cuccu,
 Ne swik thu never nu."

It may be paraphrased thus :—

"Summer is come in ;
 Loud sings the cuckoo ;
 The seed grows, and the mead blows,
 And now the woods spring.
 The ewe bleats after the lamb ;
 The calf lows after the cow ;
 The bullock starteth,
 The buck verteth,*
 Merrily sings the cuckoo.
 Well singest thou, cuckoo,
 And may thou never cease."

There is an old Christmas melody anent the Boar's Head, which is still sung by the students of Oxford ; but instead of the genuine grin of the snout, a wooden head is substituted—

"The Bore's hed in hande bring I,
 With garlands gay and rosemary ;
 I pray you all sing merely
 Qui estes in convivio.
 The Bore's hed, I understand,
 Is the chefe service in this land ;
 Look wherever it can be fande,
 Servite cum cantico.

* Rushes to cover.

Be gladde, lords, both great and less,
 For this hath ordained our stewarde,
 To cheer you all this Christmasse—
 The Bore's hed with mustarde."

The following modernised Bacchannalian was a general favourite about the commencement of the 17th century—

"Bring hither the bowl,
 The brimming brown bowl,
 And quaff the rich juice right merrily ;
 Let the wine-cup go round,
 Till the solid ground
 Shall shake at the noise of our revelry.
 Let wassail and wine
 Their pleasures combine,
 While we quaff the rich juice right merrily ;
 Let us quaff till we die,
 When the saints, we rely,
 Will mingle their songs with our revelry."

Since these were written, how many thousands of songs have been circulated. Are not Beranger's songs sung up and down all France? It was his glory to know—

"The spinsters, and the knitters in the sun,
 Do use to sing them."

And are not the lyrics of Burns, and Eliza Cook, and Charles Mackay, and Tom Hood, our own people's poets, everywhere?

Some who read these lines, having a grandfather or great-uncle living in an agricultural district of England will have heard about *statutes*; i.e., set days when servants of both sexes exhibit themselves in the public market-places to be hired. "English slavery!" vociferates Simon Sleek. "Re-

ducing the human form divine to the level of mere cattle! It's high time the legislature interfered to stop this disgraceful exhibition!" In my opinion, Simon's denunciations are unphilanthropic. All the year round do these sons and daughters of toil anticipate this festival with growing hope. No matter how hard the place, or harsh the master, in wet, or freezing, or sultry weather, amid suffering and fatigue, the swains know that they will be happy at the *hirings*. And who would blast their joy! Well, the strongest argument in favour of upholding "statutes" is, that the lads and lasses here gain their fresh annual aspirations, which constitute a chief source of enjoyment for the coming year. You don't quite understand me? Then I will explain. Every one knows that the agricultural servant has no means of learning anything while he is in service, for has he not to eat, drink, work, and sleep? Thus every hour of the week is absorbed. You are also aware that the greatest, I may almost say the only, enjoyment is to sing or whistle while at work; hence whistling and the plough-tail have become inseparable. But are they to sing the old tunes over and over again until the very birds in the fields grow tired of the monotony? Robin has abstracted all the nutriment out of—

"Kitty was a charming maid,
And carried a milking pail."

Betsy, too, has sung, albeit in soft low tones befitting her gentle nature,—

"Then take me in thy arms, my love,
And blow the candle out,"

until she is tired of it; and they all sigh for fresh sources of song. They know that such desires will be abundantly gratified at the "statutes." But how satisfied, and with what kind of songs? There can be no doubt that so long as *Acæde* is known and worshipped, female beauty will be the endless theme of song. Surely here lyrical writers may find scope and variety of sentiment. I remember once, at a bachelors' party, conversation turned upon the geography of female loveliness, and a dispute arose as to what feature was most celebrated in song. One said feet, and mentioned,—

"That underneath her petticoat,
Like mice the *feet* kept peeping out."

Another diffidently asserted that the ankle would become popular, but for the disgusting habit of wearing long trains. One smooth-faced fellow stuck close to the bosom, and gave us numerous illustrations, which a caviller in the party maintained had nothing tangible to repose upon; as, for instance,—

"Come, rest in this *bosom*."

Again,—

"As underneath its fragrant shade,
I pressed her to my bosom."

A third was chivalrous on lips, but after quoting three or four instances, he was asked to forbear, as the associations were too repugnant. I went in boldly in support of eyes, confining my examples to those of a single obscure little poet—

- "Lesbia hath a beaming *eye*."
 "Erin the tear and the smile in thine *eye*."
 "'Twas from Kathleen's *eyes* he flew,
 Eyes of most unholy blue."
 "The spell of those *eyes*."
 "Her laughing blue *eyes* soon with piety glistened."
 "The light which lies in woman's *eyes*."
 "Whene'er I see those smiling *eyes*."
 "To ladies' *eyes* around, boy."
 "As long as the world has such lips and such *eyes*."
 "But woman's bright story is told in her *eyes*."
 "Beauty may boast of her *eyes* and her cheek."
 "*Eyes* beaming with welcome shall throng round to
 light thee."
 "You've only to light up kind young *eyes*."
 "Young hearts when they feel the soft light of her *eye*."

I was ordered to give up quoting, for the *eyes* had it.

Philosophy is a high vocation, and philosophical poetry has many admirers. Still it is a debatable question how far this characteristic conduces to lyrical success. The province of song is to develop the affections rather than to perplex or even to enlarge the understanding. No doubt a deep, abstract meaning pervades the large batch of melodies which are usually sung by gentlemen with ebony faces and cherry lips; but I have often tried in vain to discover it. To me it seems a paradox that in a people so eminently practical as the Americans, this abstruse lyrical feature should so largely predominate. Take one specimen for example:—

"In South Car'lina de darkies go.
 Sing song, kitty, can't you ki me oh?
 Dars whar de white folks plant de tow,

Sing song, kitty, can't you ki me oh?
Cover de ground all ober wid smoke,
Sing song, kitty, can't you ki me oh?
And up de darkies heads dey poke,
Sing song, kitty, can't you ki me oh?
Keemo! kimo! dar! oh whar?
Wid my hi, my ho, and in came Sally singing
Sometimes penny winkle ling turn, nip-cat,
Sing song, kitty, can't you ki me oh?" &c.

A legion of effusions like this now call forth international admiration. Time was when other songs could charm; when the "Old Arm Chair" awakened holy memories, and the "Good Time Coming," a manly hope; when that exquisite piece of natural description "The Ivy Green," made the very nerves to creep. Heigho! but the future prospects of Britain are fearfully clouded, for the priests of *Æde* are going after strange gods, and the voice of the singer may at length cease from our streets.

I am not fond of hurdy-gurdies. The noise is mechanical; and apt, when the swivel is out of order, to become discordant. By patronising these, we may be relieving poverty, but not encouraging merit. Instruments which are animated by the breath of man may, however, claim exemption from this censure, because these often speak the language of the soul. There is a mysterious power in music considered as the mere combination of sound. It visibly affects all sentient existence—men, women, horses, dogs, and cats. The charger, equally with the soldier, is inspired by martial strains for the combat, and the wily serpent, entranced with that

soft melody, almost forgets its sting. To the poet, fancy may associate personal incidents with the vibrations of sound—a thousand memories of all his hopes and fears mingle in the strain; yea, music may become in some measure a companion. Pag-anini's fiddle, albeit it could swear, discoursed to its owner in sweet tones like a loving friend; it had a wonderful gift of language. But the imagination of the great unwashed is obtuse; to them a sound is a sound, and they speak in the vulgar tongue. Still, at times, they may be roused to action by earnest, manly sentiments, even in song; while a genuine pathetic appeal will not often be laughed to scorn. The business of these men's lives is to do tough jobs—to build houses and ships; to puddle iron, and make wearing apparel: they have no time to dream. But they love songs, for these in some measure keep the human alive within them; ay, even in this age, when their identity is almost mixed up with the machinery which they work, the goddess of song whispers to them that there are other objects fittest to be loved, and feelings which it is beautiful to cultivate. Help us then, reader, to discriminate good songs—to weed them of the rubbish; and, if you meet in the street with one who is truly a singer, give him a penny.

There are thousands of good honest-hearted people who contend that music is a divine gift made solely for devotion, and censure the rest of the world very highly for countenancing songs. These are the righteous overmuch. Ask for one of these fine moral stanzas set to music, and a hint

is soon thrown out that your heart is the centre of much iniquity. Sing a song—la, la, la, la—awful ! They ask with an air of triumph, “What is the character of our musical effusions ? These are love songs.” Well, let them sing on ; there is usually more weakness than criminality attending such performances, and often a great deal more pleasure than either. If beautifully and chastely written, if the character embodied be noble, and ardent, and pure, it will inspire our affections, and mould the heart in harmony with the object of our song. “But there are Bacchanalian ditties ; songs which inspire a love for the midnight revel ; which make drunkenness good fellowship ; which invoke friendship, love, truth, and I know not what else, to grace their orgies.

‘Wine whets the wit,’ they say, ‘and warms the heart,
And fills the mind with fancy’s brightest rays ;
Cements more closely nature’s sweetest ties,
And strengthens friendship.’

Here I will not contend. “Then there are war songs—a laurel wreath to deck the murderer’s brow—songs which incite malice and revenge against those whom God would have dwell together, or live apart in friendship.” Nor do I sanction these ; but we must take care not to censure that which is in itself good, simply because it may be prostituted to a bad purpose. If poetry and music joined can gild with such a charm, and almost ennobled objects which are base ; if song, under almost any circumstances, can stimulate men to action, this proves its great power, and how desirable that such influence should be

directed in a proper channel. Why may we not have, instead of the inebriate's, a song of reason's dawn, of temperance, with health and comfort joined? and instead of the warrior's, a song of universal brotherhood—of the loves and the graces, growing up amidst the abodes of peace? and instead of the unchaste one's song, which inflames the passions to quench them in ruin, why may not a song of connubial love, with all the joys and endearments of domestic life, attune our voice and heart? Surely themes like these can never be less sweet,—

“Then sing, sing, music was given
To lighten the gay, and kindle the loving;
Souls here, like planets in heaven,
By harmony's laws alone are kept moving.”

Music is to thousands an innate principle, the spontaneous ebullition of the soul; and you may as well attempt to check the ocean's roar as stop their tuneful voice. Then how necessary that these inspirations should unfold themselves in ennobling sentiments. Here permit me a word or two about sacred songs. It is perfectly right, since this life has relations to the eternity beyond it, to draw men's feelings upward and heavenward. And what so calculated to nurture the influences of piety as the inspiration of song? The two are akin in their very nature, for both are essentially spiritual. But although music and poetry occupy their highest and proper position as the handmaids of devotion, still we cannot conceal the fact that the masses have not, and will not, relish the conventionalisms of a

puritan hymn-book. Our teachers have yet to learn the grand secret of religious teaching. Abstractedly the solemn verities of Christianity are to the majority absolutely distasteful; but, presented suddenly to the mind, interwoven with subjects and circumstances with which the attention is engrossed, their conviction is perfectly irresistible. This is pre-eminently true in regard to song; what we want is not so much an addition of sacred lyrics as an occasional leaven of religion tempering our moral and social songs. Where a sudden flash of religious feeling can be thus infused into our popular airs, the effects are much more thrilling than could be produced by a whole batch of professedly-sacred poetry. I have frequently remarked how a well-spring of devout feeling may be awakened by association. Some subjects seem naturally to develop holy thoughts. I think it is the American Indians who have a tradition that a certain bird is the bearer of communications from the land of spirits. Mrs Hemans seized at once the leading associations, and what a fine spiritual influence has she breathed in her apostrophe,—

“Thou art come from the spirit land, thou bird,” &c.

A great work remains to be done in the lyrical department of poetry, since, with a few honourable exceptions, our songs are a disgrace to the age. We want to put a good national song-book in every poor man's hand. Give us more tender, hopeful, cheering, lyrical pieces, and we will stick them up

in workshops throughout the land, that the associations may be infused into every thought and circumstance of life. Oh, that some noble spirits would unite heart and soul in this glorious object; the blessings of millions would then descend upon their heads. What a vast political and social influence may not the poet wield! Germinate the impulse of lofty purposes, and the deeds are sure to follow.

And here I wish to have a little familiar conversation with the reader. Have we received in our own souls a large baptism of poetry? Do we love to cherish the deep emotion and the burning thought? "Ay," you say, "this is just the point I wish to know.—Do I possess the true poetic faculty, and to what extent?" Well, let us mark narrowly the history of our own mind and heart. Poetry is the science of the soul's hidden emotions. Every glimpse which a man gains of the beautiful, has its source and centre within. How does he feel when gazing upon the mementos of antiquity? Is there the witching influence of association, giving life to the memories of the past? He stands on the site of some old moated castle, his imagination busy unbarring the tomb of a long-slept world. Are they all there, flitting before the vision of the mind—the mail-clad warrior, the gentle dame—do they really live again; and does he mingle with them in the gay and giddy scene? Has he a large heart? Can he compass the whole world within the grasp of his sympathies? Is he wealthy? I

ask not whether he possesses many round shining pieces of metal—which the sordid worship—nor whether his chest is crammed with musty old title-deeds, but has he large interest at the bank of Nature? God's universe is the property of all who have a title in the soul. Poetry is that faculty of appropriation by which alone we can be truly said to possess or enjoy anything. The heart where poetry has made her home can never be desolate. A Grecian bard, cradled in the comforts and luxuries of life, was once wrecked on a desert strand. Standing naked on a craggy promontory, imagination kindling with the wild grandeur of the scene, he exclaimed, "I have lost nothing!" And so it is; the poet may not in reality have a human friend to console him, and yet he may encircle the whole family of man in his embraces; he may not have a foot of land to call his own, and yet the whole universe is his empire. But, further, is he a devout man? Poetry in its very nature is Godlike; it is—if I may so use an expression—the ebullition of divinity infused into the soul. Poetry and piety, in their true essence, are almost identical. What is Christian experience, the aspiring faith, the ardent love, the calm subduing peace, the triumph, and hope, but the poetry of a divine life? Poetry is soon extinguished in the atmosphere of materialism. What would infidelity do with the poet's lyre? The sceptic no sooner feels the divinity stirring within him than he becomes a worshipper. Finally, has he a warm imagination, acute sensibil-

ities, a heart full of deep and tender emotion, a true sense of the beautiful? If he has, then, although he may never have rhymed a couplet or written a stanza, he carries with him into every nook of life the elements of divine poetry.

A CONVERSATION ABOUT MILTON.

A CONVERSATION ABOUT MILTON.

LET us peep into the family circle of the Bensons. It is evening, and all the members are sitting by their own fireside. Mr Benson, sen., is busy with some accounts. His good lady, having knit the second round previous to narrowing, allows the fingers to lie idle. There is a tinge of concern, if not anxiety, visible on her features, which clearly betokens some kind of perplexity. It may be respecting those pickles—as to whether the onions were sufficiently scalded—or perhaps she had neglected to test the vinegar before using it. Frank is reading, as usual. Edwin sits looking from one to the other, without any determinate employment, while Eleanor is engaged with a piece of fanciful embroidery.

At length, Frank breaks silence by exclaiming,—
“This is very beautiful!”

“What is beautiful?” inquires their father, without apparently diverting his attention from the ledger.

“I am reading the *Comus* of Milton,” replied Frank.

"What is it about?" said Nelly; "tell us in a few words—quick."

"The scene is laid in a wild wood, where the Attendant Genius appears: afterwards Comus and his noisy crew indulge their fancy and their vagaries."

"A story about fairies and hobgoblins!" interrupted Nelly.

"A maiden, who has lost her brothers in the forest, draws near, and begins a song."

"By the bye," said Mr Benson, now pushing aside his books, "did you ever read Dr Johnson's critique on Comus?"

"I have, and do not see anything improbable in that to which the doctor objects, namely, that the brothers, leaving their sister fatigued on a bank, and wandering too far in search of berries, should lose both their path and the lady. As I was reading the poem, however, an objection presented itself, which, in my opinion, has some force. It is scarcely likely that a maiden, alone, bewildered, and lost in a forest, would lull her fears or call for succour in harmonious cadences. An invocation to echo is not, I think, what the situation would naturally inspire."

"Frank *versus* the doctor!" exclaimed Edwin.

"Comus, however, lends a willing ear, and breaks out in this beautiful soliloquy,—

[*Reads*] 'Can any mortal creature of earth's mould
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast—'

And so on. After which, enamoured of her charms,

he appears disguised as a shepherd, and makes use of his enchantments to allure and seduce the maiden."

"The dialogues which take place between Comus and the lady," observed Mr Benson, "contain not only the finest poetry, but great dramatic effect. We are not, it may be, deeply absorbed by the conversation of the brothers, which is owing partly to the fact of our having forestalled them in a knowledge of the events. It is certainly true that the mind sympathises more with direct personal suffering than with any the most sincere and fervent expressions of solicitude on another's account."

"But is the sympathy of the brothers natural and fervent?" said Frank. Some may object that such formal philosophising is inconsistent with the tenderest anxiety. Shakespeare would have portrayed it differently. Even the author himself seems impressed with a conviction of its wearisomeness, and hence the sudden break in the dialogue,—

[*Reads*]

Elder Brother.

List, list ; I hear

Some far-off halloo break the silent air.

Second Brother. Methought so too ; what should it be ?

Elder Brother.

For certain

Either some one like us night-founded
here,

Or else some neighbour woodman, or at
worst,

Some roving robber calling to his fellows.

Second Brother.

Heaven keep my sister !"

"That last short expression of the second brother," said Mr Benson, "makes up for many defects."

"The supernatural personages of the drama," continued Frank, "are not only most in character, but they speak the richest poetry. Nothing can be finer than some of the descriptive passages spoken by the Attendant Spirit. For instance, the brothers, deceived by the form of the celestial visitor, and mistaking him for their father's shepherd, make known their loss. The disguised shepherd says,—

[*Reads*] 'This evening late, by then the chewing flocks
Had ta'en their supper on the savoury herb
Of knot-grass dew-besprent, and were in fold,
I sat me down to watch upon a bank
With ivy canopied, and interwove
With flaunting honeysuckle, and began,
Rapt in a pleasing fit of melancholy,
To meditate my rural minstrelsy,
Till fancy had her fill : but, ere a close,
The wonted roar was up amidst the woods,
And fill'd the air with barbarous dissonance ;
At which I ceased, and listened them awhile,
Till an unusual stop of sudden silence
Gave respite to the drowsy flighted steeds,
That draw the litter of close curtain'd sleep ;
At last a soft and solemn-breathing sound
Rose like a steam of rich distill'd perfumes,
And stole upon the air, that even silence
Was took ere she was aware, and wish'd she might
Deny her nature, and be never more
Still to be so displaced. I was all ear,
And took in strains that might create a soul
Under the ribs of death ; but O ! ere long,
Too well I did perceive it was the voice
Of my most honoured lady, your dear sister.
Amazed I stood, harrowed with grief and fear,
And, O poor hapless nightingale, thought I,
How sweet thou sing'st, how near the deadly snare.
Then down the lawns I ran with headlong haste,

Through paths and turnings often trod by day,
Till, guided by mine ear, I found the place,
Where that damn'd wizard, hid in sly disguise
Already, ere my best speed could prevent,
The aidless innocent lady.'

It is in the next scene between Comus and the maiden, however, where, I think, Milton manifests the uniform and fixed purpose of his mind."

"What is that, Frank?" inquired Edwin.

"It may be expressed in a single word—antagonism. We here perceive the subtle power of evil striving resolutely, but not effectually, against the highest moral good. Glozing sophisticated words are employed, but used in vain, and we involuntarily exclaim,—

'What a strong guard this native virtue is!'

After a few minutes' silence, Frank said, turning to his father,—

"You alluded to Dr Johnson's remarks on Comus. In my opinion, his treatment of Lycidas discloses both a want of candour and true discrimination."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Nelly. "Frank *versus* the doctor.

"The great critic," said Mr Benson, "had a strong antipathy to the poet's opinions on civil and ecclesiastical polity, which in some measure blinded his mind to the real character of Milton's genius."

"I never read Lycidas," observed Edwin.

"Then read it the first opportunity," Mr Benson replied.

"In respect to this poem at least," said Frank, "Dr Johnson's criticism does not adhere."

"Does not adhere!" replied Edwin, "I scarcely understand you. You mean that the shaft of criticism flies wide, or perhaps drops down like a point-less arrow, instead of hitting the mark."

"It does not adhere," repeated Frank. "For instance, in the construction of *Lycidas*, Milton employs the Grecian model; most, if not all the objections urged against the poem ought, therefore, to have regarded this circumstance, because the very character and diction of the piece were thus classically prescribed. Were we to judge of the effusion simply as a lament for the untimely death of his friend, we might perhaps be justified in styling 'the diction harsh and the numbers unpleasing,' or, in respect to the sentiment, object that 'passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy, nor calls upon *Arethuse* and *Mincius*,' nor tells of 'rough satyrs and fawns with cloven heel.' Had the poet chosen to emulate a standard agreeable to modern versification, this criticism would have been properly directed; but having adopted for *Lycidas* a certain model, it is as an imitation that we must decide upon its merits and defects. It may admit of a question how far Milton's judgment is to be commended in choosing such a model for an elegy, and thus enshrining the memory of his friend with pastoral and mythological associations."

"That is the point for dispute," replied Mr Benson.

"You say nothing, *ma mère*," said Nelly. "Don't you think this is something like a dog's head?" and she handed over her work frame.

"It will look very well," replied her mother, approvingly.

"It has been said," observed Mr Benson, "that these minor effusions of Milton, and Comus in particular, discover the dawn or twilight of *Paradise Lost*. They show us at a glance the individual phases of the budding genius. We find the same fertile invention united with minute but strong descriptive power. In the plot, too, we have the same mysterious relation of spiritual and earthly intercourse, the same panting after the pure ideal."

"I never could undertake the task of reading through *Paradise Lost*," said Nelly: "it is too formidable. And yet one does not like to seem ignorant of the great bard; so whenever opportunity presents itself I chime in with the praise."

"By this practice," replied Mr Benson, "you run great risk of being disgraced. I was once sailing in a steamboat down the Humber, when my attention was directed to a young man, who continued to pace the deck with a stately solemn step. From the folds of his graceful cloak protruded a delicate white hand. He was reading. At intervals he would gaze intently on the book, and then, (particularly when he observed the attention of others drawn towards himself) with an inspired gesture turn his eyes to the clouds. Presently he took a seat next to my own, and adjoining a plain venerable old gentleman, who thus addressed him—'You keep company with the bards, I suspect, sir. Are you fond of poetry?' 'Perfectly enraptured with it, my dear sir.' 'How do you like Milton?'

the old man inquired. 'Oh! sublime!—Paradise Lost is the greatest poem since the days of Homer.' Thinking, no doubt, to test his young friend's proficiency in the study of Milton, he asked what he thought of Agamemnon's Address on leading his host to the conflict. 'Inimitable!—the finest portraiture in the whole poem.' Correcting the intentional blunder, the old man said it now occurred to him that the passage was not Milton's, but in Homer. This appeared to confuse our hero, who stammered an apology that he might possibly be wrong, that, in fact, he had not read more than a dozen lines of Paradise Lost since he was fourteen years of age."

"At which period, of course, he would consume the viands with a relish," observed Edwin.

"I love to receive instruction," said Nelly, "without the labour of poring through huge masses of typography. And now, Mr Critic," said she, turning to Frank, "you must give us a synopsis of Paradise Lost without any-mad-versions, as the gentle Elia would say."

"Indeed, Nell, you are somewhat exacting; as if, forsooth, I had every movement of the celebrated Dramatis Personæ by heart."

"I want the gist of the poem—a plain common-sense account concerning all this *spiritual and earthly intercourse*. When fast for a quotation you must turn to the book."

"Nelly mistakes the matter," said Mr Benson; "she evidently supposes that the plan and design of Paradise Lost are like the plot of a popular

novel. I would advise her to spend quarter of an hour in reading through what is termed the argument—that is, a list of contents prefixed to the opening of each chapter or ‘Book,’ as it is termed.”

“I never thought of this before,” replied Nelly “In future, whenever I wish to appear learned without much trouble, my plan will be to devour the list of contents : then I shall escape a similar mortification to that which befell the inspired young man.”

“As we appear, at present, to be somewhat interested in Milton,” continued Mr Benson, “let me ask you to point out the most remarkable features of the poet’s history or writings.”

“May I answer first ?” inquired Nelly.

“Yes, pert one, if it be to the point,” replied Mr Benson.

“Milton spent part of his youth in Italy, and I have heard that once he fell asleep under an olive tree—bright, sunny Italy, how I long to wander amidst thy classic shrines !—some ladies were passing, when one of them, kneeling down, kissed the poet’s brow, exclaiming to her companions—‘How beautiful !’”

“Did she mean the kiss was beautiful, or the young man ?” inquired Edwin.

“Indeed, I don’t know ; but after all it was a very interesting episode.”

“Milton’s early life,” said Mr Benson, trying to conceal a smile, “presents various reminiscences—his school-boy days, for instance. Who can tell as he gazes upon a promiscuous throng, which amongst them is born to great achievements ? It is now

two centuries and a quarter ago, when a scrivener's son might be seen mingling with the young hopefuls of Cambridge University. His light, flowing hair, parted on the forehead, fell in long curls around his neck, and so beautiful was he that they called him 'the lady of Christ's College.' The youth devoted those fresh, warm impulses to the acquisition of solid learning; not only distinguishing himself by his intimate acquaintance with the ancient masters, but for the elegance and purity of his Latin exercises."

"His career at college," said Frank, "appears to have contributed more to his intellectual progress than his personal gratification."

"True," replied Mr Benson, "either the pupil was insubordinate, or the principal despotic—perhaps the former, for the youth, with high principle, combined strong passions. Be this as it may, after acquiring the usual degrees, Milton left Alma Mater with no feelings of regret. He was originally intended for the church; but his estimate of the ministerial character was not the measure of human convenience. No doubt he saw in some of his fellow students flagrant examples of clerical expediency, and, it may be, that a free expression of his sentiments on this important subject made him highly unpopular."

"I have heard they whipped him," said Nelly.

"Without crediting this report," rejoined Mr Benson, "we may fairly infer that he had been degraded, since the fact of his being temporarily dismissed from college, and various other circum-

stances show that he was sufficiently under the ban. As the twig is bent, the tree inclines. Milton, all his life through, became a bitter antagonist to the Established Church. On leaving Cambridge, he spent five years in solitude, but not in idleness, at his father's residence, during which period he cultivated that extensive acquaintance with the ancient classics, which were to him an inspiration and a model. . . .

"Genius has a progressive development, like the natural life of states. It is an interesting study to watch how a desire, a purpose, a struggling conception, unfolds itself into a glorious embodied thing. A seed is dropped into the earth; it grows and multiplies its kind; an idea produces certain fruit—it lives for ever. How closely are assimilated man's eternal interests and the minutest circumstances of to-day; and how important that the spring-tide of life should neither be neglected nor abused! Milton nurtured those young imaginings. I remember that in one of his earliest epistles he thus writes:—

"'Whatever the Deity may have bestowed upon me in other respects, He has certainly inspired me, if any ever were inspired, with a passion for the good and fair. Nor did Ceres, according to the fable, ever seek her daughter Proserpine with such unceasing solicitude as I have sought this perfect model in all the forms and appearances of things.'

"He had completed *Comus*, *Lycidas*, with several other of his minor poems, and was in his twenty-ninth year before he went to Italy. His object was

to proceed also into Greece, but hearing of the struggles for liberty at home, after an absence of fifteen months, he returned in haste to England."

"Dr Johnson sneeringly remarks," said Frank, "'Let not our veneration for Milton forbid us to look with some degree of merriment on great promises and small performances: on the man who hastens home because his countrymen are contending for their liberty, and when he reaches the scene of action, vapours out his patriotism in a private boarding-school.'"

"Truly," replied Mr Benson, "when the mind is warped by prejudice, it mistakes even virtue for folly. Milton's slender resources may, at this period, have been a misfortune; but the fact that he tried to eke out the expenses of a moderate establishment, by labour so honourable and useful, deserves our unqualified praise. Had he been an unprincipled demagogue, the circumstances of the times might have been made to subserve ambitious and selfish designs. Dr Johnson was doubtless in a crusty mood when he wrote this paragraph, for he, too, had honourably struggled with adversity, and could respect a man of letters who by his own exertion places himself above dependence."

"Unless he meant that Milton ought to have become a soldier," added Frank, "the doctor's charge, if even it were a reproach, had but a small foundation of truth, for after a few more paragraphs, we find written, 'He now began to engage in the controversies of the times, and lent his breath to blow the flames of contention.' If I remember

rightly, his treatise on reformation was published within a year after his return from Italy, to which rapidly succeeded a number of polemical tracts.

"Milton's prose writings are now partially read, but until the last few years, I believe, they were rarely mentioned. It may seem strange that treatises, which had so large an influence on the times, should have been consigned so early and so long to almost total oblivion."

"We may find several reasons for this effect," replied Mr Benson. "At the Restoration, Milton's character and writings were everywhere maligned, so that few were found zealous enough to do honour to his merits. After a time, as these calumnies were either entirely passed over, or but feebly rebutted, even the admirers of Milton would give partial credence to the testimony of reproach, and, resting securely on his poetic fame, fear to search further lest inquiry should end in mortification. No pains or expense were at this period spared by the enemies of Milton to prevent the circulation of his works. Richard Barron mentions instances when clergymen of the Established Church devoted large sums of money towards buying up every copy they could find, on purpose to destroy them. No doubt, great prudence would be exercised in the purchase; otherwise, as in the case of Wycliff's edition of the Bible, the demand might only encourage the printers to strike off new impressions. That there is in these prose treatises a large amount of bitter sarcasm, and of coarse personal invective, is fully admitted. Specks these may be, and are,

on a disc of brightness ; still, 'it is a pleasant thing to behold the sun.' In my opinion, Milton's prose possesses three prime elements of a great style—strength, adaptation, and variety. As in his poetry, the changes are innumerable ; we are carried forward through—

‘ Many a winding bout
Of linked sweetness long drawn out ;’

There is consistency and unity without the smallest approach to monotony, a dignity which befits the exposition of lofty principles, and associated with these a perspicuity which, next to its strength, is perhaps the most characteristic feature of Milton's style. To many readers, particularly such as are absorbed by the enervating foibles and senseless literature of fashionable life, the periods seem interminable and dull exceedingly ; but those who love to mark the opening thought, to watch how each new phase of the idea naturally clothes itself in its own appropriate garb, the writings of Milton will prove an unfailing source of interest and profit.”

“*Ma mère*,” said Nelly, “would you like to have been Milton's wife?”

“Not I, child, great and glorious as he was. I am content.”

“That's right, *ma mère*. Methinks this man was born to be revered. Such a majestic intellect would disdain familiarity, and put our social impulses under restraint. Then he was so stern, that I verily believe he never laughed.”

“He did worse, Nelly,” said Edwin, “he married.”

“Poor Mary Powell ! I pity her. She found,

when too late, as many do, that there was little congeniality in their habits and dispositions."

"The lady," rejoined Edwin, "was intent upon a giddy round of pleasures—was at home with the gay and the frivolous."

"She found little gaiety, or even sociability in her husband's house," replied Nelly, with some asperity.

"Milton's tastes and pursuits," added Edwin, "were nurtured only by retirement; and his ideal of domestic life consisted not in outward display, but in making home happy."

"Which means, that the wife must sacrifice everything to please her husband, and receive scant attention in return."

"Mrs Milton," said Edwin, "tired of the simple, quiet life her husband led, obtained leave to visit her father; and when many weeks had passed away, slighted her lord's admonitions, and spurned his entreaties to return."

"He *entreat* her to return? Command, you mean!"

"This conduct irritated, nay, exasperated the poet, who, purposing a final separation, first sought to convince the public of the lawfulness and expediency of divorce, and afterwards resolved to put his tenets into practice."

"Proceeded to—what am I speaking of?" exclaimed Nelly—"proceeded to offer proposals for another wife, contrary to the laws of God and man!"

"Which were, however, never consummated, for Mrs Mary asked pardon, and was restored."

"Ah, well!—women are strange creatures!" replied Nelly.

After a short pause which succeeded the altercation between Edwin and Nelly, Frank resumed the conversation—

“Some of Milton’s biographers,” said he, “affect great zeal in showing how the principles and spirit of his writings are but phases of the poet’s personal experience, or were developed by the incidents of the times. Born and bred a puritan, his whole soul sympathised with the sufferings of his race. There was the remembrance of great indignities, of cruel reiterated oppression ; and, as a result, say they, we have the acerbity of his controversial vein. His domestic infelicities, it is further urged, had much to do with unfolding if not originating his sentiments on divorce, while it is in this long discoursing on love and marriage—the contemplation of conubial bliss, and the causes which prevent its realisation—that we are to look for the first impressions and not a little of the materials of *Paradise Lost*.”

“Conclusions which, in my opinion, are far-fetched and wire-drawn,” replied Edwin.

“I do not think so,” rejoined Frank. “A great truth lies somewhere within the precincts of their remarks which, if we can fully realise, will give us more light than could be obtained from whole reams of chronology. It’s a grave question how far not only a man’s ideas, but his capacity for thinking, is determined by influences from without. Who can think of Milton apart from the age in which he lived ? A vast amount of undeveloped mental stamina was wrapped up in the constitution

of his being; but it might have lain a dormant thing or spent its force on trifling objects, had not great events, by directing this vital power, called forth a proportionate visible embodiment."

"I don't exactly understand Frank," Nelly said; "but he must be either talking high treason or imitating Coleridge."

"Peace, child; and let us hear Frank's argument," said Mr Benson.

"Milton lived in peculiar times, when giant aspirations were struggling in the heart of the nation. Then flourished the old Puritans, a race endowed with high veneration and strong religious feeling—men who had consequently the strictest regard for propriety. Was it to be expected that a son of their own, who inherited those stern and manly qualities, would prove a morbid, sentimental poet, or waste his energies on what is frivolous and low? A certain dignity invests every character and scene which he depicts. Satan and all his purposes are nobly evil. There is no lack of deep malignity or of daring blasphemy, but it is profanity of a magnificent sort. The very character of hell is uniformly imposing. Milton's inspiration sprang from strong religious feeling, which, awakening a devout sense of responsibility, gave to his public character a purity such as few teachers have possessed. Critics forget, as they measure our poet with other men, to place this distinguishing feature into the account. The torch of Milton was a light from heaven; the emotions which throbbed in that noble breast were effusions of the Holy Ghost.

Milton's genius was the spirit of a divine mind, brooding upon eternal realities; hence its superiority to the dictates of low ambition and the grovelling impulses of earth; and hence, as a mountain amongst mole-hills, *Paradise Lost* is exalted above other poems."

Frank now turned to his father, saying—

"In answer to your question, Which is the most important epoch in Milton's life? I should say, decidedly, the commencement of *Paradise Lost*. He was now at an age when the vital energies usually begin to flag, when nature, wearied with struggling, desires security and repose. But Milton's aspirations were strongest as his physical powers declined; in proof of which fact, he now resolves to prosecute three works, great and diverse—to write a history of England, a Latin dictionary, and an epic poem. But he was now blind."

"Strange," said Edwin, "that the two greatest poems should have been the production of blind men. Is there nothing in the fact but a mere casualty?"

"I think there is," Frank replied. "What is poetry?"

"Imitation," Edwin said.

"It is this, and something more: but we will admit the definition. Poetry, then, is a reproduction of outward, visible things within the sphere of man's intellectual existence. The beauty of external objects is assimilated with the highest qualities of the soul, awakening the finer susceptibilities. But imagination is most active when the

senses are in abeyance. This reorganisation of images furnished by experience requires, more than anything, quietude and self-abstraction. Few, I believe, even of those minute poetic delineations of nature were drawn literally, with the objects themselves in view: they are, for the most part, exhumed by the memory in the poet's study. There are none perhaps, but who at some period of their lives, when in the presence of nature, have had perceptions of the beautiful and feelings of reverence; but these sensations, which to the bulk of mankind are but a vague and fleeting experience, became to the poet, by a slow intellectual process, part and parcel of himself. Here is the blind Milton. Shut out from almost every intercourse with the world, he turns with avidity to the records of experience, doing what the poet of perfect vision has to do—reproduce the image of the visible in the world within him. With what a strange, mysterious feeling, itself the germ of poetry, does he summon up the beautiful spectacle of a smiling world. There is something acute and very tender in such a retrospection."

"Many people," observed Edwin, "allude to the age and outward circumstances of the poet as conditions unfavourable to great enterprise. I think differently."

"Truly," continued Frank, "like a stricken deer, the poet lay neglected in his solitude; but, thrown back upon himself, those great energies of his nature had free utterance. With Cromwell he could no longer advise on the government of the state; the

welfare of nations no longer depended upon his prudent diplomacy; public opinion had changed, and too sincere to change with the times, he was thrown aside in disgrace. Milton's contemporaries, no doubt, thought the regicide's course was finished, or they had almost forgotten that he existed. They little understood his destiny; the consummation and the glory was yet to come. This one mind, by stamping the character of an age's literature, connects his epoch and his country with all time. The chronology of the world is not evolutions of matter, but ideas which are evolved; the records of genius are the only things permanent. How the age should reverence its mighty teachers! Is it so? Look at the outward condition of Milton at the period in question. He who so recently was a leader in the Commonwealth, became the jest of a ribald court. The poet might have forgiven their jeers, had they not harassed him with their *bandogs*, and mulcted his slender patrimony by their exorbitant fines. Surely the life and labours of a high-principled man of genius had some claim on a nation's regard?"

"It is consoling to think," said Mr Benson, "that all true minds have their life within themselves, and develop a vital principle which scorns temporary ease or pleasure when duty calls, which rises above adverse circumstances, and depends for reward upon something better than the phases of a vacillating crowd. A very uncertain empty thing is present applause. A man must look within himself for reward. Were it not that genius throbs

for development—that the elements of greatness are essentially active, the seer, without a word of guidance or admonition, would leave the world to follow its own ways. Milton was a Christian, and the spirit of Christianity is self-sacrificing benevolence. A better proof of Milton's piety could scarcely be afforded than the exile's conduct at this period of his life. In poverty, in disgrace, in blindness, he is still calm and serene. Had he exhausted these powerful energies for purposes of ambition or for personal aggrandizement, would there have been no bitterness of disappointment, no murmurings or complaint? Milton had an inward satisfaction that his mission to the world had been conscientiously performed; and now at fifty years of age, he commences his greatest work. Such aptitude for labour at such a season was to the poet individually an unspeakable boon. Next to the consolations of religion, poetry yielded a rich reward. In one of his letters he writes with great tenderness that, although God had put the universe of outward things into darkness, his inward vision grew more extended and clear. Shut out by blindness from the active duties of the world, by his countrymen neglected and maligned—participating largely in the degradation of a fallen cause—none had greater need of inward comfort. To me it seems (so cheerless were his earthly prospects) that to awaken the memory of the past, or to antedate immortal joys, was necessary to prevent the mind from fading in despair.”

“Much,” said Frank, “might be said about his

producing a great poem at fifty years of age; although it may not, perhaps, appear surprising that he should have selected such a theme. The conceptions of a mind like Milton's had made a large draught upon illimitable truth—a vast store of materials lay garnered in that blind old poet. Younger and inexperienced, he might have taken a less adventurous flight; but now his mind and heart were enlarged, and so was his theme."

"I wonder how he managed," Nelly remarked. "You see he had no sight. He could not muse with ready pen, noting down his thoughts as they occurred. I suppose he would impress them line by line upon the memory, until the store grew into a great burden, when some ready amanuensis must relieve him of his load."

"And then," said Edwin, "amidst so many thousand lines produced at wide intervals, note the unity of the poem and the absence of tautology. It is really a marvel, considering that he could only recur to former passages with the help of other eyes. Besides, one might suppose that he would require almost constantly to be reading up for authorities and illustrations."

"Milton's poetry is almost purely imaginative," replied Frank. Even in *dramatis personæ* and general construction of plot, he is but little indebted to history, sacred or profane. The difficulties which enshrouded his theme, were on a par with its magnitude. Great realities he had, indeed, to muse on—facts verified by the seal of inspiration, but which occurred, for the most part, beyond the

sphere of our physical relations, and all under circumstances peculiar and special. A mighty revolt had arisen in heaven, but not even the voice of inspiration has uttered the dread secret how it grew. The fact alone is revealed—omnipotence was defied. The doom was fearful: that rebel band was hurled from heaven to bottomless perdition. The nature of that hell—that great unrest—the length and breadth of woe, no seer has told us; for indeed, who of mortal flesh can fully know the relations of the spiritual and the material?”

“And yet we wish to know,” said Edwin; “we feel a peculiar interest in prying into things hidden and mysterious. To antedate the spirit-life, to wander and converse with demons in these awful shades, or to picture angelic purity without a taint of sin, are employments congenial to poetic minds.”

“Milton’s theme,” continued Frank, “presented difficulties great and insurmountable. When spiritual existence is invested with corporeal attributes, and the characters act in and by physical agencies, the judgment is satisfied with manifestations which accord with any known state of being.”

“Or any conceivable state which does not awaken feelings of incongruity,” observed Mr Benson.

“*That*, with such a theme, is surely a licence which the poet may assume. I wish to call attention to the battle with the fallen angels. It is with something like awe that we become spectators of a fight where huge rocks and the mighty thunderbolts are instruments of warfare. The stroke of Abdiel, which, aimed at Satan’s crest, made the

proud fiend recoil upon his knee ten paces backward, is a signal specimen of military prowess. There is something terrific, too, in the single combat of Michael and the arch-enemy. The champions engage hand to hand, and we gaze in breathless suspense to see which first draws blood. Alack! there is no blood. Michael's keen blade met—

‘The sword of Satan, with swift force to smite,
Descending, and in half cut sheer; nor stayed,
But with swift wheel reversed, deep entering shared
All his right side: then Satan first knew pain
And writhed him to and fro convolved.’

We are just about to exult that the death-blow has been given, when, strange to view—

‘A stream of nectarous humour issuing flows,
And the ethereal substance closed.’”

“Such passages only become incongruous,” said Mr Benson, “according as we limit our analogy to human experience, which inference is itself a palpable misnomer. It is important to inquire, however, whether the moral of such creations be entirely free from objection. The opinions we may express will depend materially upon the judgment previously formed of the character and condition of the fallen host. It must be admitted that there is a grandeur—a primal nobility in Milton's Satan which partakes of divinity. We feel, on some occasions, involuntarily betrayed into admiration of such a being, until we reflect that his purposes are wrongly directed. Routed in the fight, see him, struggling with powerful emotions, about

to address his mighty host, (those whom he had seduced to revolt, but whom he could not lead to conquest)—

‘Thrice he essayed, and thrice in spite of scorn,
Tears such as angels weep burst forth, at length
Words interwove with sighs found out their way.’

Swayed by force, but not in spirit bound, too proud to accept even lost happiness by submission, we see the highest magnanimity united with the most daring impiety.

‘True, He,* so much the stronger proved—
He with His thunder, and till then who knew
The force of those dire arms? Yet not for these,
Nor what the potent victor in his rage,
Can else inflict do I repent or change;
Though changed in outward lustre, that fix’d mind,
And high disdain from sense of injured merit’”——

“List to that,” Edwin said. “What motive can rouse a high-souled being more than sense of injured merit?”

Mr Benson continued, “Outraged he vows revenge,—

‘What though the field be lost!
All is not lost; the unconquerable will
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield,
And what is else not to be overcome;
That glory never shall His wrath or might
Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace
With suppliant knee, and deify His power
Who from the terror of this arm so late
Doubted His empire; that were low indeed,
That were an ignominy, and shame beneath
This downfall.’

* Alluding to heaven’s King.

All, even those who deprecate the moral purpose of these passages, must pay homage to the mind which can evoke such a demon, and invest the King of Hell with such sublime energies."

"But," said Nelly, "shall we contend for the portrait, on the ground of its truthfulness? My ideas of the devil were in no respects grand, for I always looked upon Satan as a vile, ugly, repugnant individual."

"And as the author of sin, with all its miseries, this is the proper estimate," replied Mr Benson. "But Milton is giving us a grand imaginative character; and I must admit, that, in its daring and impiety, the portrait has too often found a counterpart in human form."

"With the character of Satan," Frank observed, "is closely associated the consequences of his rebellion. Through all the vaultings of pride and ambition, we discern the dark, deep undercurrent of his woe—a spectacle it is, like the mad infuriated bull kicking against the goads. Still, leaving out that insatiable revenge and self-will, the King of Hell is much less an impersonation of evil than many spirits incarnate which mingle in our everyday scenes. Let us not forget that guilt has its gradations. Satan was just beginning a career of evil; and Milton very properly depicts only those phases which, at this period, had scope for development. To my mind, there is a close analogy between the great features of the poem and the character of the author. A poet, to produce anything truthful, must himself be in earnest, must in

some measure sympathise with his imaginary hero. Milton's soul was great; hence he could not assimilate with what is essentially low—the mean and the vile had no place in his being. A wide sympathy had the poet with everything that is godlike, a warm appreciation of the noble and the pure. Look at the Bower of Love; here we have the acme of earthly relations, no double-refined epithalamiums, no transient intoxicating dream; nor a condition too sensuous, so as to debase the higher faculties, but that very state to which the hopefully virtuous are aiming to restore our depraved humanity.”

“Hem! It was very wrong to cough just at this present,” said Nelly.

Without noticing the interruption, Frank continued, “Even hell, fearful in horrors, is to the poet's view not incompatible with a certain amount of material and intellectual grandeur.

‘There stood a hill not far whose grisly top
Belch'd fire and rolling smoke; the rest entire
Shone with a glossy scurf: undoubted sign
That in his womb was hid metallic ore,
The work of sulphur.
Led on by Mammon they undermine this rock,
And dig out ribs of gold.’

Then he who was the architect in heaven, ere banished thence, plans noble edifices which, it would seem, might almost vie in magnificence with that New Jerusalem John saw in a vision. Here is a specimen, which

‘Rose like an exhalation with the sound
Of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet.

Built like a temple, whose pilasters round
Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
With golden architrave ; nor did there want
Cornice of frieze, with bossy sculptures graven :
The roof was fretted gold.' ”

“ It would appear,” said Edwin, “ that the Doric is a very ancient order of architecture.”

“ As to their employments,” continued Frank, “ what with debates in council, and the indulgence of each varying whim, their life consists in very tolerable activity. Some skim the broad extended vault, to try their strength of wing. One great band marshals itself in rank and file, in mimic battle : some roam beyond their domains in quest of adventure, and view great wonders.

‘ Others more mild
Retreated in a silent valley, sing
With notes angelical to many a harp
Their own heroic deeds, and hapless fall
By doom of battle !’

On first impression one is tempted to exclaim—
Rather a noble sort of hell ! But look a little closer. Spirits, great even in their fall, may struggle with their miserable but deserved lot, against inane and cowardly despair, or strive in a routine of active pursuits to drown the associations of their abode ; but the source of happiness is gone, heaven is lost, and virtue, which alone brings peace and joy, has no residence here.”

“ I was just thinking,” said Nelly, “ what a wonderful mind the poet must have had to create all this.”

“ And yet,” replied Frank, “ were we to believe

some of his malicious contemporaries, Milton himself created very little, but that even *Paradise Lost* is a great plagiarism. One Joshua Sylvester, it appears, wrote a translation of Dubartas's 'Divine Weeks and Works.' Why Sylvester uses the plural, 'weeks,' seeing the book purports to give an account of the *seven days* of the creation, I am at a loss to conjecture. The poem went through thirty editions in six years, which is remarkable, when we take into account that the style is barbarous, and the sentiment a compound of pedantry and extravagance. The book was published by Henry Loundes. Loundes was a puritan, and kept a bookseller's shop in the same street in which Milton's father lived. These important facts led to the conclusion that Milton was an early admirer of this remarkable book; indeed, it was confidently asserted, that the author of *Paradise Lost* copied, not only the leading idea, but much of his materials from the French poet."

"Alexander Barclay," observed Edwin, "a worthy priest of Henry the Seventh's reign, was much given to writing Eclogues. In one of these Eclogues he discourses of Adam and Eve, introducing them to us in the following plot:—Adam has gone forth to his labour, leaving Eve at home with the children. Some of the latter she is '*kembing*,' (which process is described as even more salutary than ornamental) while the rest are playing by her side. She is expecting 'a visit from her Maker,' and being behindhand with her work, stows the dirty children away, two of them in a 'tub of draff,'

some up the chimney, and the rest under some hay and straw; for she was ashamed that her visitor should see such dirty children. The sweet 'kemb'd' cherubs are beneficently received, and favours are showered down upon their heads; they are elected to kingdoms, dukedoms, and baronies, down even to the mayoralty and aldermanic offices. With a true mother's instinct, Eve bethinks her of the forlorn ones, and draws them forth; but they were in such a dirty condition, so littered with straw, and covered with cobwebs, and begrimed, that their visitor was offended, and condemned them to the poverty which their appearance deserved. Now what do we gather from all this as it respects Milton? First then, the poet-priest discourses of Adam and Eve; so does Milton; but as Barclay preceded Milton, the former claims priority of invention; and, although the author of *Paradise Lost* does not reproduce the dirty children, nor the 'keming,' nor the 'tub of draff,' he discourses of heavenly visitors, of Adam leaving for a while his lovely spouse, and of his labour in the garden; from which circumstances it is plain that Milton is a copyist."

"A clear and strong intellect had the poet," said Mr Benson, "to stand, as it were, upon that airy pinnacle which divides things tangible from the invisible world, and, while events transpire which make the very heavens quake, gaze like a calm spectator noting each circumstance. It may be, and no doubt is, possible to indulge this strength of vision to a degree which is both

dangerous and presumptuous. We never find too great freedom with the being and attributes of God promotive of reverence. The religious feeling within us expresses itself with mysterious awe in an expansive conception of the Infinite. 'Unto what will ye liken me?' saith the Almighty. Certainly not to the finite and the perishable, for there can be no true worship where the divinity is circumscribed within the narrow limits of our feeble minds. Enshrine the Godhead with the relative conditions of humanity, and we foster not religious adoration, but self love. There are limits even to the bounds of a virtuous imagination; there is a holy of holies, into which no wayward human thought may struggle to enter—it cannot enter, for tainted mortality would be withered in its presence. True, God holds communion with man, but it is faith, not sight, which constitutes the medium, and the bounds of time and space, while they bar not our intercourse, test the strength of our belief. Primitive man was a reflex of the Deity, and, to my mind, even now this insatiable thirst for knowledge, while it bespeaks the divinity of man's origin, is a latent germ—obscured, but not lost—of the noble and the true. Ah! but those powers are wickedly perverted. Time was when the pupil was docile and mild, when the dictates of reason were subservient to the dictum of the Supreme, when faith triumphed. But pride and dogmatism are the fruit of sin. Now this vacil-

lating incongruous reason is sovereign, and even the Infinite must be determined according to its narrow and prescribed powers."

"But Reason herself is blind," interrupted Frank, "or she would discover the force of her own paradox. That which is determined is necessarily partial, and only the Infinite can comprehend Himself. If we must philosophise in order to believe, where is the ground of certitude—the goal to which we may advance and repose?"

"Many a gigantic intellect has been wrecked in the pursuit," observed Mr Benson; "while the humble Christian hears with reverence the Word of God, and finds joy in believing. There is a sense in which the great object of faith must be brought within the sphere of our experience, just as we love our benefactors, and admire excellent characters. But there is that in man—a deep mysterious hidden life—which can assimilate itself to other objects than the phenomena of earth, something which not all this fleshly thralldom can imprison, which impulses are spiritual. God is a Spirit, therefore they are most like God. But let no one presume to reduce these and their author within the narrow limits of physical existence. We repudiate with sincere disgust all attempts to mimic the actions of Deity, which attempts are, to my mind, the fatal error of Paradise Lost. At the throne of God it were fitting that even the poet should bend in silent adoration. It is painful to hear depicted the Eternal Father as a parent instructing his child, while, with

mutual panegyric, they revolve each other's purposes, delighted that they harmonise. While the Supreme is thus invested with the relations of sense, Satan, in his bold adventurous flight to seek this planet—making even chaos and the laws of nature tributary to his will—appears, in many respects, the more sublime personage. Who, for instance, can forgive the impiety of such episodes as the following?—While Satan and his host are fulminating mischief in the north of heaven, the Father is represented as thus addressing his Son—

‘Let us advise, and to this hazard draw
With speed what force is left, and all employ
In our defence, lest unawares we lose
This our high place, our sanctuary, our hill.’

A battle of the highest created intelligences we can bear, but to uphold the throne of the Eternal with the shifts of a paltry diplomacy is, to my mind, a consideration morally worse than that of the awestruck pantheist who sees in all phenomena the incarnation of his God.”

“The reader,” said Frank, “frequently stumbles upon passages which he cannot harmonise with his belief in the Trinity.”

“Then again, in other places,” replied Mr Benson, “he finds not only the attributes, but the characteristic names of Deity applied to the Son—

‘And thus the filial Godhead answering spake—
O Father,’ &c.

In those passages, too, where in sublime strains is depicted the Messiah's appearance to defeat the rebel host, and to create new worlds—‘girt with

omnipotence'—supreme homage is paid to the eternal Son. Now, although we do not turn to a work of imagination for exposition of doctrine, still the reader may justly demand, where fundamental truths are necessarily brought to view, that their supreme importance should secure them from all ambiguity and inconsistency. It might be urged that in poetic description, while imagination is active, ranging through spheres fresh opening to the sight, that the judgment is in abeyance; thus sentiments and coincidents are insensibly, as it were, introduced, which the author, in sedate moods, would disallow. We can scarcely attribute it to anything different, that Milton, while claiming for the Son essential divinity, should yet, in many places, introduce Him in very anomalous relations. The poet recounts His glory as the Creator of the world, and we are carried in imagination backward to a period when the triune Deity existed alone in their own essential being. We turn over a few pages; Raphael unfolds to Adam the dread past, when—

‘As yet this world was not, and chaos wild
Reigned where these heavens now roll.’

The Infinite introduces for the first time His Son in the following harangue—

‘Hear, all ye angels, progeny of light,
Thrones, dominations, principdoms, virtues, powers;
Hear my decree, which unrevoked shall stand,
This day I have begot whom I declare
My only Son, and on this holy hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
At my right hand : your head I Him appoint :

And by myself have sworn, to him shall bow
All knees in heaven, and shall confess Him Lord.
Under His great vicegerent reign abide
United, as one individual soul,
For ever happy : him who disobeys,
Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day,
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
Into utter darkness, deep engulph'd, his place
Ordain'd without redemption, without end."

"It may be said," observed Frank, "that the plan and continuity of the poem requires some definitely expressed reason for the revolt in heaven, which is supplied by the exaltation of a second and delegated being as prince of the immortal dynasty. This act raises the envy of Satan, who, with his associates, conspire as against a double monarchy."

"If," said Mr Benson, "Milton had a purpose in writing, if his mission be to teach as well as to amuse, surely it is of some importance to know clearly what were his religious tenets. It is pleasant and elevating to bask in the light of intellectual beauty ; but as we require that which unfolds itself into immortal vigour, this question is of most importance—On what am I building my eternal hopes ? We are, I trust, not bigots, who would shut out from divine mercy all who do not participate in our creed ; but if I read the present age aright, there is a large undercurrent of latitudinarianism, running amidst quicksands in regions of mysticism. The great result is that men, neglecting the divine chart, place the highest testimony on the interpretations of human genius. It is not likely, therefore, that the idiosyncrasies of a

mind like Milton's should be passed heedlessly by."

"Was Milton a Socinian?" inquired Nelly.

"Dr Channing replies yes," observed Edwin.

"And on very slight grounds, I think," said Frank. "Without dwelling on particular passages of his works, whoever, giving five minutes' attention to the groundwork of Milton's two great poems, can entertain any doubt of the leading features of his belief? I wonder whether Cromwell and those stanch old puritans ever discovered that Milton was a Socinian? Which shall we premise—that Milton disguised his true sentiments, or that his colleagues lacked penetration?"

"A century and a half after the poet's death," observed Mr Benson, "a very remarkable manuscript, a Treatise on Christian Doctrine,—John Milton to the Churches of the Saints, greeting—was found amongst the State Papers. Here we have discussed some very ticklish subjects, as 'God,' 'Divine Decrees,' 'the Son of God,' (concerning whom the writer contends for an inferior exaltation), while the doctrines of divorce, and even polygamy, receive here a large measure of favour."

"I have seen the book," said Frank, "and without knowing your sentiments respecting it, allow me to say that I more than doubt its genuineness. I regard it as an artful attempt to impose upon the public, and derive my strongest conviction of its spuriousness from internal evidence of the treatise itself. Who could ever suspect the acute, vigorous mind of Milton indulging a tissue of such crude

speculations? Knowing how eager the enemies of Milton were to assail his name, we can scarcely imagine any scheme artful enough or too base which they would not attempt. His personal character was a coat of mail, from which the darts of calumny fell pointless; but what if they could slander his theological creed? There is nothing in which a Christian once making an open profession would be more careful and explicit than in the expression of his belief. Is it not strange, then, after having embodied his real sentiments, that he should leave them sneakingly to find their way into publicity by any doubtful coincident, as best they might, with the far stronger probability that they would be buried amidst a mass of lumber and destroyed? Is it not surprising also, if the author set any value upon a treatise of such considerable bulk, that no hint in any form should be dropped of its existence? But supposing, for a moment, this manuscript is the genuine production of the poet, still, as a set-off to the acknowledged portion of his writings, of how much value is it in determining his religious belief? Does not a writer from many motives indulge speculations in his study, when he would repudiate the idea of publishing them to the world? Should we not infer, from the fact of their being passed heedlessly by, that the author regarded them of but little value, if not wholly exceptionable?"


"After this eloquent vindication," said Edwin, "I am at a loss to know how we must regard the treatise. Frank begins first by doubting and deny-

ing its genuineness, then he proceeds to admit that it might be the production of Milton, and lastly, to justify its writing."

"It appears," said Mr Benson, "that this mysterious treatise was found in 1823 amongst the State Papers by Mr Robert Lemon, deputy-keeper of the records. The document was bundled up together with a mass of informations, letters, &c., relating to the Popish Plot of 1668, and the Rye-house Plot of 1683. There was included also a syllabus of Milton's official letters and correspondence, the whole enclosed in an envelope, and directed to Mr Skinner, merchant. We find, however, that Milton retired from his official duties in 1655; therefore, it is evident that the poet could not have mixed this manuscript with documents bearing date 1683, and left them himself in the State Paper Office."

"The first question which suggests itself," said Edwin, "is, Have we any evidence that the poet ever wrote a theological treatise?"

"Wood maintains," replied Mr Benson, "that after the troubles of the Restoration, Milton finished three works,—Paradise Lost, a Latin Thesaurus, and a Body of Divinity, which latter now is, or was lately, in the hands of the author's acquaintance, Cyriac Skinner, and the Latin Thesaurus in the custody of Edward Phillips, his nephew. Toland, who published a Life of Milton in 1699, thus alludes to the treatise on Christian Doctrine,—'He wrote likewise a system of divinity, but whether intended for public view, or collected merely for his own use, I cannot determine. It was in the hands of his



friend Cyriack Skinner, and where at present is uncertain.' Skinner and the poet we know to have been on the most intimate terms; if I mistake not, the former was one of Milton's pupils, and it was to this friend the poet addressed that admirable sonnet on his blindness, beginning,—

'Cyriack, this three years' day, these eyes though clear,' &c."

"Then, secondly," said Edwin, "is there any chain of evidence connecting a treatise on divinity in Cyriack Skinner's possession with the papers on the Popish and Rye-house plots, and with the State Paper Office?"

"That I cannot clearly make out," replied Mr Benson. "Skinner being a partizan of the republican faction, might be suspected of secret conspiracy; and it is supposed that his papers were seized by the Secretary of State and thus deposited in the office. There is no evidence to show, however, that Cyriac Skinner, if alive at the time, ever took any part in the plots alluded to. Mr Lemon's attempt to prove how the manuscript became impounded, is exceedingly dubious, for, at the outset, he confounds two distinct persons of the name of Skinner, for the purpose of connecting one Daniel Skinner with the Popish plot. It is not altogether improbable that the manuscript had descended to some individual connected with the state offices, who may have deposited it here for security, amongst Milton's official correspondence."

"Thirdly," said Edwin, "does the caligraphy of this document afford any clue to its authenticity?"

"The manuscript," said Mr Benson, "comprises seven hundred and thirty-five pages in Latin, and is of two parts, written in two distinct hands with few erasures or interlineations; as if, indeed, it were a corrected copy, and the latter part, from the resemblance of the writing to a female hand, Mr Lemon concludes, must have been copied by Milton's daughter Mary.

"The strongest point of evidence, and almost the only one which weighs with me, is the production of a letter (itself discovered in the State Paper Office) from Daniel Elzevir to Sir Joseph Williamson, which is dated Amsterdam, November 1676, Sir Joseph Williamson being then Secretary of State. The writer states that about a year before, Mr Skinner put into his hands to print, a treatise of Theology written by the deceased poet Milton, but that he (Elzevir) dissenting from many of the opinions therein expressed, refused to print it; and also that seeing Mr Skinner at Amsterdam some short time after, that gentleman, learning the writer's opinion, expressed his satisfaction that the work was not commenced."

"I was not aware until now," said Frank, "that there was such strong evidence to support the authenticity of this document. I think you will agree with me, however, that his late majesty acted very unwisely in commanding Dr Sumner to translate and edit the work. As a manuscript it might have continued to excite curiosity or provoke disputation, instead of, as now, awakening a feeling of regret in the multitude of Milton's warmest admirers."

After a considerable pause, Frank observed —

“I often regret that so little is known of Milton’s private history. It would not, perhaps, lessen our admiration of his genius, if we could enter into the minutæ of his everyday life—to mark how the views and feelings of the poet moulded the common routine of social events. When did he first purpose to achieve something which the world would not willingly let die? Was it at ten years of age when, in return for a poem he had written, his portrait was painted?”

“Milton at a very early age excelled in versification,” replied Mr Benson. “In his fifteenth year he wrote two Paraphrases of Psalms; the 136th, beginning—

‘Let us with a gladsome mind
Praise the Lord, for he is kind;
For his mercies aye endure
Ever faithful, ever sure.’

And the 114th, commencing—

‘When the blest seed of Terah’s faithful son
After long toil their liberty had won;
And past from Pharian fields to Canaan land,
Led by the strength of the Almighty hand,
Jehovah’s wonders were in Israel shown,’ &c.

There is in both of these pieces a classic severity of taste remarkable in one so young.”

“Had that meeting with Galileo in the cell of the inquisition at Florence,” resumed Frank, “anything to do with his strong impulse for liberty? The few indistinct pictures of his social life whet our curiosity. There is Mary Powell——”

"Ay," said Nelly, snatching at the name. "I wonder whether Milton, even during the honeymoon, could put aside that stern aspect, or what some would call 'dignified reserve,' and become her attentive consort? Not he, indeed; he may have had tender sympathies, but he would lock them up within his own breast rather than betray the weakness of letting her share them. Of course his self-respect was such that he must exact a proper quantity of obedience; and by this lordly supremacy, no doubt, snapped the unity of domestic ties."

"In his conjugal relations," said Edwin, "Nelly is more severe upon the poet than even Dr Johnson himself. The doctor merely insinuates that she delighted not in spare diet and hard study."

"As if, forsooth," observed Frank, "Milton weighed her out a certain quantity of coarse meal per diem! The bride was evidently a weak and giddy woman, who failed to estimate her noble husband. Years pass away; there are his daughters reading to their blind father in what was often to them an unknown tongue, and engrossing those immortal words which fell from his lips."

"I have heard," said Nelly, "that Milton was very harsh with his daughters, imposing on them a vast amount of literary drudgery—calling them from their beds in the night-time either to write down his lines, or to search out passages from some crabbed author."

"On the other hand," replied Edwin, "it is reported that these ladies were undutiful and repining

—they were tired of such labour, seeing it brought neither wealth nor present renown.”

“We really,” observed Mr Benson, “know scarcely anything of Milton’s social and domestic life—a few shadowy mementos, which awaken various and contradictory surmises, being all which are recorded. It may be, as we get older, that even the smallest events become increasedlly interesting, from that pensive shade which invariably settles on decaying energies; but, be this as it may, I like best to muse upon the *old* man, although the circumstances of this period are, for the most part, painful. I ask myself such questions as these—What were the poet’s feelings, when, BY THE KING, A PROCLAMATION was issued, condemning his books to be burnt by the common hangman, an officer whose services might at any moment be required on the author’s person, for the placard read—‘And whereas the said John Milton and John Goodwin are both fled, or so obscure themselves, that no endeavours used for their apprehension can take effect, whereby they might be brought to legal trial, and deservedly receive condign punishment for their treasons,’ and so forth? Again, when the Act of Indemnity was passed, is it true that Milton had to shrink from private assassination? Did the flippant dandies of King Charles’ court pass the venerable man in derision, mocking in the public streets at his lonely situation, and mimicking his gait? Still there were a few, even then, who truly regarded him; and it must have been doubly cheering when, now and then, an old friend

dropped in to relieve his seclusion. Of such was the quaker Elsworth. Andrew Marvel, the man who resisted tempting bribes, that he might be free to speak the truth, often visited the poet in his obscurity. Marvel, after the Restoration, entered parliament; yet neither the influence of the Lord Treasurer, (his old school-fellow Danby,) nor the proffered order for £1000, could move him. He had part of yesterday's leg of mutton left for dinner, and was content. Methinks they were interesting meetings. Two such men in such circumstances would be mutually helpful, the one to encourage, and the other to console. Can we not picture them—Marvel, with a reverend mien, and nought of pity, declares the blind poet is more glorious than the proudest in the land; while Milton, no way meagre in commendation, encourages his friend to live above allurements, in the light of eternal rectitude. It is thus that the truly good emulate one another.

“And then the poet had his diversions. Did his sightless eyes not weep when, upon the organ, he awoke such melody as served best to antedate the joys above? Since so few of these reminiscences have been recorded, we must picture the rest. How thankful should we have been to that contemporary who often guided him to a seat in the sunshine, if he had told us what the blind man said as he felt the breezes fanning his quiet face. And when he came to die—for the last scene is ever momentous—how eagerly should we now treasure up his parting words. The knowledge is denied us: we have no

autobiography or private journal which transcends the author, and unfolds to us more clearly the man. We have, indeed, preserved a little of his epistolary correspondence, which letters are admirable literary productions, but open out few traits of the poet's private life and feelings. The term familiar letters is perhaps something of a misnomer, for these epistles would strengthen the conviction that Milton could never unbend himself, or forget for a moment his intellectual status. Extending, as they do, over the most important periods of his life—when, as a youth, he was laying up stores of erudition; when, as a politician and a controversialist, he was stimulating the impulses of the nation; when, in age and blindness, he was gathering for all peoples and all time immortal food—in all this wide range of experience we can glean but very few mementos of his personal character to embalm in our affections. In these letters of private friendship there is a finish and elaboration, as if it were necessary to address an individual as carefully as to defend the principles of the state. Here, for example, is one to Alexander Gill, dated, London, May 26th, 1628, containing this passage—

“In referring the merits of your poem to my judgment, you confer on me as great an honour as the gods would if the contending musical immortals had called me in to adjudge the palm of victory: as poets babble that it formerly fell to the lot of Tmolus, the guardian of the Lydian Mount. I know not whether I ought to congratulate Henry Nassau more on the capture of the city,

or the composition of your poems; for I think this victory produced nothing more entitled to distinction and to fame than your poem.”

“Who, within the last century at least,” exclaimed Edwin, “ever heard of Alexander Gill or his poem? Did we not know Milton thus far—know perfectly that he never had a particle of fun in him, I should say he was plying Elec with a small amount of banter.”

“There is,” continued Mr Benson, “an admirable description of his blindness, in a letter addressed, Westminster, Sept. 28, 1654, to Leonard Philarus, the Athenian, from which I will read the following passages :—

“Not long after the sight in the left part of the eye (which I lost some years before the other) became quite obscured and prevented me from discerning any object on that side, the sight of my other eye had been gradually and sensibly vanishing away for about three years; some months before it entirely perished, though I stood motionless, everything I looked at seemed in motion to and fro. A stiff cloudy vapour seemed to have settled on my forehead and temples, which usually occasioned a sort of somnolent pressure upon my eyes, and particularly from dinner till the evening, so that I often recollect what is said of the poet Phineas in the *Argonautics*,—

“A stupor deep his cloudy temples bound,
And when he walked he seemed as whirling round,
Or in a feeble trance he speechless lay.”

I ought not to forget that, while I had any sight

left, as soon as I lay down on my bed and turned on either side, a flood of light used to gush from my closed eyelids. Then, as my sight became daily more impaired, the colours became more faint, and were emitted with a certain inward crackling sound; but at present, every species of illumination being as it were extinguished, there is diffused around me nothing but darkness, or darkness mingled and streaked with an ashy-brown.'

"Then follows a passage which needs no comment to make it impressive—

"'But why may one not acquiesce in the privation of his sight, when God has so amply furnished his mind and his conscience with eyes? While He so tenderly provides for me, while He so graciously leads me by the hand and directs me in the way, I will, since it is His pleasure, rather rejoice than repine.'"

Both Frank and Edwin would have thanked Mr Benson, if they dared, for his valuable comments and remarks; they knew, however, that the great object which he sought to develop, was a personal appreciation of right sentiments.

COWPER.

COWPER.

OF course you have read Cowper? No! Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Here is a rich, solid vein of enjoyment to be had at any bookseller's for a few pence, and yet you have not availed yourself of it. Learn wisdom and buy the book. As a whole, I myself have a very high opinion of the poems in question. Amongst the many who may be designated "household poets," there are few, perhaps none, who present stronger claims to our attention than Cowper; and none whose writings have tended more towards developing right principles, noble impulses, and virtuous actions in the world. This is high praise; but pay attention for half-an-hour, while we run through the poet's history, after which, I trust, a little interest will be awakened in his works. *Nolens volens*, then, in true biographical fashion. Wm. Cowper was born, November 26th, at the rectory of Great Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire. His father was son of Spencer Cowper, a judge in the Court of Common Pleas, whose brother was Lord Chancellor; so that our poet was of a very distinguished family. At six years of age

he was sent to a school kept by Dr Pitman ; and being a quiet, delicate, diffident boy, it is said the other lads maltreated him shamefully. About this time also, he suffered a great deal from weak eyes, so much indeed, that his sight was despaired of, but after two years' attention from an oculist, he grew better. Afterwards he was sent to Westminster school, where he continued until his eighteenth year, when he was articled for three years to an attorney. Lord Thurlow was at the same period a fellow clerk in the office. He appears, however, not to have liked the law. I do not say he was naturally lazy ; he was thoughtless—frittering away his time in trifling pursuits, and, as a matter of course, made very little proficiency in his studies. Cowper, as we have seen, was born an aristocrat, and might reasonably hope for family patronage. Alas, for those whose fathers have attained to eminence ; they very seldom make much out in a laborious profession—and Cowper did not. We will be guided by his own testimony. Writing to a friend he says, "I did assuredly live three years with Mr Chapman, a solicitor, that is to say, I slept three years in his house ; but I lived, that is to say, I spent my days, in Southampton Row, as you very well remember. There was I and the future Lord Chancellor Thurlow, constantly employed from morning to night in giggling and making giggle, instead of studying the law." In 1763, after having expended eleven years of idleness in the Middle Temple, a barrister without practice, the offices of reading-clerk and clerk of the Committees of the House of

Lords fell vacant; which, being at the disposal of Cowper's cousin, he very naturally conferred them upon his relative. Here I should like to digress for a moment and speak more directly to the reader. Sir, I presume you are a plain, sensible man, and honest—not at all nervous or given to fainting. If you have to speak or read in company, it does not bring on the palpitation?—Not it. And you are not wanting in true British spirit, either? When addressing a large mixed audience, you can look them boldly in the face like a man; ay, and if they put their fingers to the nose or cough, treat such insolence with silent contempt, being inwardly comforted by the assurance that you have more wisdom than the pack of them. No one can say this conduct is wrong, or incompatible with the genius of our glorious constitution; no—

‘ You do act nobly, friend, and like a man of honour ;
Nobly do you act, and like a gentleman ;’

but all men have not this blessed confidence, and few in this particular were so much lacking as the poet Cowper. The very idea of having to read before the House of Lords induced the most morbid sensations, throwing him, as the period drew on, into paroxysms of fear, which eventually caused him to resign without a trial. He accepted the inferior office of Clerk of the Journals, simply because it would not subject him to public rehearsals. Here, however, some dispute arose as to the cousin's right of nomination, and Cowper was called to an examination before the bar of the house. “They

whose spirits are formed like mine," he writes, "to whom a public exhibition of themselves is mortal poison, may have some idea of the horrors of my situation; others can have none. To require my attendance at the bar of the House, that I might there publicly entitle myself to the office, was in effect to exclude me from it. In the meantime, the interests of my friend, the honour of his choice, my own reputation and circumstances, all urged me forward—all pressed me to undertake that which I saw to be impossible."

In his short autobiography, the poet gives us a most affecting account of the state of his mind at this period:—"I began to look upon madness as the only chance remaining. I had a strong kind of foreboding that so it would one day fare with me; and I wished for it earnestly, and looked forward to it with impatient expectation. My chief fear was that my senses would not fail me time enough to excuse my appearance at the bar of the House of Lords, which was the only purpose I wanted it to answer." As the time drew on, he writes:—"I grew more sullen and reserved, fled from all society, even from my most intimate friends, and shut myself up in my chambers. The ruin of my fortune, the contempt of my relations and acquaintance, the prejudice I should do my patron, were all urged on me with irresistible energy. Being reconciled to the apprehension of madness, I began to be reconciled to the apprehension of death. Though formerly, in my happiest hours, I had never been able to glance a single thought that way without shud-

dering at the idea of dissolution, I now wished for it, and found myself but little shocked at the idea of procuring it myself. I considered life as my property, and therefore at my own disposal. Men of great name, I observed, had destroyed themselves, and the world still retained the profoundest respect for their memories." To such a height was frenzy leading him, that even suicide became a cherished purpose of his mind. Poor Cowper! The account of his increasing madness, recorded by himself, is as singularly graphic as it is painful:—"While I traversed the apartment, expecting every moment that the earth would open her mouth and swallow me—my conscience scaring me, and the city of refuge out of reach and out of sight—a strange and terrible darkness fell upon me. If it were possible that a heavy blow could light on the brain without touching the skull, such was the sensation I felt. I clapped my hand to my forehead, and cried aloud through the pain it gave me."*

* Had this been insanity, would he, at the period of its most aggravated symptoms, have retained that perfect consciousness of his condition, remarking with minuteness all the phases of melancholy? Cowper is an awful instance of a sensitive temperament yielding to sloth, until the power of volition is conquered. By slow and painful degrees was this fearful result consummated; in fact, his life was a perpetual struggle between convictions of his proper duty and a want of resolution to pursue it, accompanied with remorse. This struggle bred nervous oppression, until, increased by sedentary habits, it reached a point which scarcely anything could alleviate and nothing could subdue. Almost the only alleviating influence lay in the composition of poetry; and this, by the wise direction

One day, while in this frame of mind, Cowper was dressing in his bedroom, and instead of tying the garter—a bit of red caddis—round his leg, he fastened this string to the top of the room. But it was too short, so he stood upon a chair, and then drew the ribbon by a noose around his neck. With one effort, the chair was jerked aside, and he was suspended, choking. A single struggle more, and the ribbon broke. A servant girl heard him fall heavily on the floor, and rushing in, saw the broken string, also a deep red mark upon the miserable object's neck.

And this was the finale of that bugbear of a public examination: on the very day when Cowper was to appear before the House, he was placed, a morbid hypochondriac, under medical restraint. Thus was engendered a strange monomania, which beclouded at different intervals no inconsiderable portion of the poet's life. Here, methinks, I see advancing boldly a little whisking interrogator, with an expression on his lips, something between a smile and a sneer, "Do you mean to tell me that all this originated from a timorous dread of occasionally reading a paper in public, and there and then being asked a civil question? I won't believe it. Talk about delicate nerves and exquisite sensi-

of friends, was rather forced upon him as an amusement than undertaken by any voluntary effort of his own. Had it not been for the circle in which his lot was cast, Cowper would have still retained his misery, probably in more aggravated forms, and the world would have missed his poetry.

bility as you like ; but I tell you the thing is incredible, and, besides, Cowper was a lawyer." Bravo, my little wrangler, you put the question like a man of mettle. You are partly right and partly wrong. Listen while we proceed to make a true and searching analysis of this mysterious case. No doubt, Cowper's melancholy condition was consummated by the circumstances we have just depicted. It is my opinion, however, that those circumstances gathered much of their force, if not their entire existence, from other causes, which lie hidden in the background. For instance, had the mind of the poet, in his earlier years, been exercised upon sound practical knowledge, and applied to useful, regular employment, that morbid irritability of his nature would have been checked, if not entirely prevented ; his views and feelings would have acquired a steadier, more cheerful bias ; and life, with the performance of constant virtuous duties, passed smoothly on towards the goal. This was not the case, however ; he had neglected his profession, frittered away his opportunities, and now, with a patrimony almost expended, was to become a burden upon his friends and a clog on society.* I know of no greater hell than for a

* I confess it seems vexing to witness the composure with which Cowper afterwards saw his little fortune diminishing—wasted amidst opportunities of increasing it, and then expect help from religion to bear his helplessness cheerfully. Still we cannot but admire his sensitiveness to incur obligation. In answer to an offer of pecuniary aid from Joseph Hill, Esq., in 1772, he thus writes :—"I would rather want many things, anything, indeed, that

man to feel truly that he is fit for no useful occupation. How can one be happy if his life be without a purpose? Cowper was never insane, he was simply miserable. A diseased nervous constitution he certainly had, which itself was originated out of indolent seclusion. He thought every eye looked jeeringly at him; and he dared not meet an intelligent stranger for fear he should be laughed at. Having neglected the opportunity of disciplining his mind, he is thenceforth unequal to any robust, healthy exercise. The world has plenty of such idiots. So extremely susceptible are they that the merest breath of rumour disorders them; they are upset for a whole week by a jest, and so intent about trifles, that their graver efforts must surely be the redemption of a kingdom. To all such I would say—Work, man, work! whatever it be, find something to do which you are capable of, and which is worth doing.

To make his situation still more embarrassing, Cowper was in love; and his pretty cousin Theodora reciprocated his affection. Fathers, however, eschew

this world can afford me, than abuse the affection of a friend. I suppose you are sometimes troubled on my account. But you need not; I have no doubt it will be seen, when my days are closed, that I served a Master who would not suffer me to want anything that was good for me. He said to Jacob, I will surely do thee good; and this He said, not for his sake only, but for ours also, if we trust in Him. This thought relieves me from the greatest part of the distress I should else suffer in my present circumstances, and enables me to *sit down peacefully upon the wreck of my fortune.*”

all romance, and look more to the substantial aliment of life; therefore Ashley Cowper, Esq., uncle to the poet, although cherishing a becoming respect for the homely virtues of his nephew, stoutly refused to give his daughter to a pauper. There was something more than this, however—something, which, as the disease progressed, preyed on his mind with more poignancy than the grief of disappointed love, or the plagues of office. What was it, think you? Gloomy perverted views on the subject of religion. This was a painful feature in his hypochondria, as it entered into every circumstance of life, bereaving him of hope. He had come to the bitter conclusion that there was no mercy for him in this world or the next; that he had sinned so foully that God would never pardon him. He had sinned foully by attempting to escape from self-made misery by self-murder. And this terrible conviction, to one whose conscience was never seared by acts of vice, will easily account for his torment. One of Cowper's biographers remarks:—"So fearfully and wonderfully are we made, that man, in all conditions, ought perhaps to pray that he may never be led to think of the Creator and of his Redeemer either too lightly or too intensely, since human misery is often seen to arise equally from an utter neglect of all spiritual concerns, and from wild extravagance of devotion." Here it will be necessary to correct a very prevalent mistake. Some who know nothing of evangelical religion but the name, and are prejudiced against it, blame Christianity for the issue. Such an insinuation is both foolish

and false. From his own testimony we learn, that up to the period of his recovery from the attack just mentioned, Cowper was a stranger to experimental piety. When calm reflection returned, he saw it was the want of religion that caused his sorrows, which, having embraced, became to the poet, when not under the influence of morbid aberration, his comfort and trust. Let no man from henceforth make a mock of Cowper's sufferings: however unscriptural and unfounded the apprehensions, to the poet they had all the bitter, scorching, damning pangs of a stern reality. For more than eighteen months did he remain in this afflicting condition, cut off almost entirely from intercourse with society. At length, feeling himself a little recovered, he left Dr Cotton, and took lodgings in Huntingdon, where he formed a lasting friendship with the Unwins. On the death of Mr Unwin he removed with the family to Olney, where resided at that time the Rev. John Newton, to whom he also became particularly attached.

Here we must pass over fifteen or sixteen years, during which time he lived in the strictest retirement, now and then writing from his retreat some of those inimitable letters which far outstrip anything epistolary we have in the language. But about his poetry—whatever merits or defects it may possess, the plea of youthful inexperience cannot be urged either in favour or extenuation. There is one piece extant which he wrote in youth. In 1748, while at Bath, he discovered the heel of an old shoe, concerning which important event he *composed* some very tolerable lines. With the

exception of this effusion, however, his poetical faculties appear to have lain dormant until he was fifty years of age. The first instance of his peculiar sparkling fancy and inimitable power of expression, is the fable of the nightingale and glow-worm, which was written at the commencement of 1780, and enclosed in a letter to his friend William Unwin. It is certainly a clever sprightly effusion, albeit naturalists may take exception to the opening announcement—

“A nightingale, that all *day* long
Had cheer'd the valley with his song,” &c.

The year following he began “Table Talk,” about which he thus writes to Mr Newton:—“It is a medley of many things; some that may be useful, and some that, for aught I know, may be very diverting. I am merry that I may decoy people into my company, and grave that they may be the better for it. Now and then I put on the garb of a philosopher, and take the opportunity that disguise procures me to drop a word in favour of religion. In short, there is some froth, and here and there a bit of sweetmeat, which seems to entitle it justly to the name of a certain dish the ladies call a trifle. I did not choose to be more facetious, lest I should consult the taste of my readers at the expense of my own reputation, nor more serious than I have been, lest I should offend theirs.” To “Table Talk,” succeeded “The Progress of Error,” “Truth,” “Expostulation,” and a number of smaller pieces, all of which were collected and published in 1782. His views and

feelings on this occasion may be gathered from a letter which he addressed to a friend :—"If," he says, "a board of inquiry were to be established, at which poets were to undergo an examination respecting the motives that induced them to publish, and I were summoned to attend, that I might give an account of mine, I think I could truly say, what perhaps few poets could, that although I have no objection to lucrative consequences, if any such should follow, that they are not my aim, much less is it my ambition to exhibit myself to the world as a genius. 'What then,' says Mr President, 'can possibly be your motive?' I answer with a bow, 'Amusement.' There is nothing but this—no occupation is within the compass of my small sphere, poetry excepted, that can do much toward diverting that train of melancholy thoughts, which, when I am thus employed, are for ever pouring themselves upon me."

"There is a pleasure in poetic pains,
Which only poets know. The shifts and turns,
The expedients and inventions multiform,
To which the mind resorts, in chase of terms
Though apt, yet coy, and difficult to win—
To arrest the fleeting images, that fill
The mirror of the mind, and hold them fast,
And force them sit, 'till he has pencill'd off
A faithful likeness of the forms he views,
Are occupations of the poet's mind
So pleasing, and that steal away the thoughts
With such address from themes of sad import.
Such joys has he that sings."

Again, in answer to his friend Mr Unwin, Cowper says, "You ask me how I feel on the occasion of

my approaching publication? Perfectly at my ease. If I had not been pretty well assured beforehand that my tranquillity would be but little endangered by such a measure, I would never have engaged in it, for I cannot bear disturbance. I have had in view two principal objects; first, to amuse myself; and, secondly, to compass that point in such a manner that others might possibly be the better for my amusement." Thus we see that the man who shunned with nervous trepidation the sight of a strange or cynical face, and would not for millions sterling have made a speech, or recited in public, could thus in printer's type unmask his mind and heart to thousands, yet calmly rest unmoved. What a tissue of inconsistencies is man! Here is one thrown into convulsions at the bare idea of going through a few dry details of business in public, who yet preserves the greatest equanimity when exposing to a larger world, but in another form, the elements of his being. Cowper as a man of business felt his incapacity; as a poet he knew that he was true and strong. Ambition in him was no low, selfish, sordid passion, but a sense of duty he owed to his Maker and mankind. God gave him a mission to his brethren; he

"assumed the lyre
And told the world, still kindling as he sung,
With more than mortal music on his tongue,
That He, who died below, and reigns above,
Inspires the song, and that His name is Love."

Had Cowper produced nothing but the poems before mentioned, he would neither have secured

nor merited a very high position amongst British poets. "The volume met with a very tardy reception," says one of his biographers. We are not surprised; coming as a first effort from an unknown poet, it would meet with a very tardy reception now; and, begging pardon of Mr Grimshaw, I could never discover the same "extraordinary merit" which characterises some of Cowper's later productions. It is generally a misfortune when editorial or biographical responsibility is entrusted to private and particular friends. With few qualifications for the task, except, perhaps, a profound respect for the memory of the author; with slender pretensions to literature, and no true appreciation of beauties and defects, they string together a medley of panegyrics, with which they belabour the writings most unmercifully. Not unfrequently the sole effect is to provoke a smile at the expense of the critic. Mr Grimshaw, for instance, has presented the world with a complete edition of Cowper; so far the public is his debtor; no one, however, will thank him for the stilted comments and critiques with which the work is bedizened, except it be in gratitude for their shortness. When he attempts to praise, it puts one in mind of an amateur in oil painting who grinds his own colours, and does not mix them well. Notice the following:—"Neglected as it was for a few years, the first volume of Cowper exhibits such a diversity of poetical powers as have rarely, indeed, been given to any individual of the ancient or modern world." Pooh! it is nonsense. No one will deny that there is, in each of the pieces,

joined to the purest sentiment, much natural, graceful, correct versification ; there is sometimes a sparkling caricature, and oftener a sage remark, mixed up with not a little that is heavy, dull, and commonplace. Laying aside the book, you are tempted to exclaim—"Why, as to the greater part of all this, any clever versifier might produce such lines, a dozen an hour, by way of recreation." The attention is seldom or never powerfully awakened : there are few passages on which the mind loves to dwell. We read on and on with the greatest equanimity, except that occasionally we find ourselves on the point of yawning, which of course is instantly checked, as such conduct would savour of disrespect. Jestings apart, however, Cowper, in the pieces before us, rarely appears to have felt poetry ; there is little of that redundant imaginary and felicitous expression which so admirably abound in the "Task ;" the verse is too much like what it in reality was—piecework, a daily employment, or a species of recreation, engaged in to beguile a weary hour.

There are few writers, perhaps, less given to plagiarism than Cowper, or against whom the charge of want of originality would be with more difficulty sustained. His "Task," not only for its powerful, earnest, touching sentiments, but in every peculiarity of style and expression, stands out in bold relief as a natural original poem. His verse is not Milton's nor Thomson's, but as much different as it is possible to conceive in the same number of syllables. In reading the first volume, however, one will frequently surmise that Cowper must have been an

ardent admirer of Pope. There is something at times in the flow of the verse exceedingly like the style of Queen Anne's little poet. Take the following, selected from a single page of "Table-Talk," for an example :—

"A. Guard what you say ; the patriotic tribe
Will sneer and charge you with a bribe—

B. A bribe ?
The worth of these three kingdoms I defy,
To lure me to the baseness of a lie :
And, of all lies (be that one poet's boast),
The lie that flatters I abhor the most.

* * * * *

B. Queredo, as he tells his sober tale,
Asked when in hell to see the royal jail ;
Approved their method in all other things :
' But where, good sir, do you confine your kings ?'
' There,' said his guide, ' the group is full in view.'
' Indeed,' replied the Don, ' there are but few.'
His black interpreter the charge disdained—
' Few, fellow ?—there are all that ever reign'd.'"

Pope founded a school of poetry which became absolute, and extended over a considerable era ; indeed, its influences were scarcely decaying when Cowper wrote. It is no wonder, therefore, that in the poet's mind should linger some echo of the standard versification ; and that, in his earliest productions, he should emulate that peculiar musical rhythm and polished art, which are the chief features in the poetry of Pope. No individual writer can suddenly change the modes of national thought, or found a new commonwealth of taste ; the world will not put aside its conventionalities too quickly. Change works silently and slowly at first, until, captivated by new forms, the general

mind loses the force of early associations. Born three years before Cowper, was one who, through a strange and chequered life, gave a new tone to literature; who, more than any other man of that age, might be considered a transition link between an artificial school and the freedom of natural writing. I allude to Oliver Goldsmith. He, the "inspired idiot," struck a first great blow at the infallibility of Pope. He also struck as effective a blow against the ponderous style of his estimable friend the lexicographer; so that from henceforth, Johnson and Pope could no longer strictly be said to divide the empires of prose and verse. In all poets before Goldsmith, there is an abiding smell of the lamp. We are painfully conscious that the form of composition was only decided upon after grave deliberation; that the rule of measurement is absolute, being framed upon the strictest recognised principles of versification; that the application of accent was a subject of profound study; so that the composition is like a beautiful artificial flower, which allures the eye, but gives little satisfaction to the mind. We sigh for the smell of nature, and that genuine tint of life which no art can bestow. Reading Goldsmith is like experiencing nature. We forget all about the turning of periods, and the construction of sentences, so utterly absorbed is the mind with the scenes and incidents of the narrative. And, as to style, the whole secret may be explained in that advice which Goldsmith gives to his brother Henry:—"Sit down as I do, and write forward until you have filled all your paper. It re-

quires no thought, at least, from the ease with which my own sentiments rise when they are addressed to you. For, believe me, my head has no share in all I write ; my heart dictates the whole."

Cowper resembled Goldsmith more nearly than Crabbe. As Southey remarks in one of his graphic letters :—"He (Crabbe) is an imitator, or rather an antithesis of Goldsmith, if such a word may be coined for the occasion. His merit is precisely the same as Goldsmith's—that of describing actual things clearly and strikingly ; but there is a wide difference between the colouring of the two poets. Goldsmith threw a sunshine over all his pictures, like that of our water-colour artist when he paints for ladies—a light and a beauty not to be found in nature, though not more brilliant than nature really affords. Crabbe's have a gloom which is also not in nature—not the shade of a heavy day, of mist, or of clouds, but the dark and overcharged shadow of one who paints by lamp light—whose very lights have a gloominess. In part this is explained by his history."

Goldsmith, despite so many personal weaknesses, had the happy faculty of observing and embodying individual traits of character. He had the power of imitation, also, in a remarkable degree ; which, although by no means the highest faculty, is always attractive, and in narrative and dramatic writing inseparable from success. It must not be inferred, however, that Goldsmith's poems had any paramount influence in moulding or directing Cowper's muse, since the latter is said never to have read

either the "Traveller" or the "Deserted Village."* If, therefore, any special analogy can be instituted between their productions, as the successive developments of a purer style, it must be traced to that general, and, I might almost say, insensible progression of the national taste; so true is it, that in literature as in politics, the lever of all revolutions subsists in the general mind. We are all agape after the "coming man;" we concentrate our ideas of excellence in the person of an individual, as if, forsooth, some demi-god will drop from heaven, and save the people by his own right arm. It were well if this hallucination, so fraught with evils, could be destroyed. Every insight which we collectively obtain of truth reacts through eternity, and helps to form that great progressive mind which shall arise to bless man's destiny. Thus, in looking at literature before Cowper wrote, we find a general desire after a purer and more natural composition. The imitators of Pope had satiated the public with

* In a letter written about the same date as the conclusion of the "Task," Cowper informs us that he had read but one poem for twelve years past. "Poetry, English poetry, I never touch, being pretty much addicted to the writing of it, and knowing that much intercourse with these gentlemen betrays us unavoidably into a habit of imitation, which I hate and despise most cordially." If, then, he had never read Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," it is a singular coincidence that both poets should have indulged in meditations so analogous, both lamenting in mournful strains the decay of country life, attributing to commerce and wealth, with pride and profusion in their train, the great causes of social prostitution. As if virtue and social enjoyment were inseparable to a rural condition.

jingling sounds: an inanity and a barrenness over-spread all. The public ear was palled, and with the desire was originated the creative power of an improved style of poetry.

Cowper is one of those poets, to read whom is like gazing upon reality; so little note does the mind take of that which is really art, awakening pleasure. He throws a beautiful association around the most familiar object, so that it appears neither vulgar nor insignificant. We feel that there is nothing unworthy in this universe, were sin absent. His descriptions are unexaggerated, his enthusiasm sincere; you find the impress of truth everywhere; nature impresses her own image on the mind. Cowper gives us few imaginary pictures, but describes graphically scenes and objects with which he was in daily communion; as, for instance, the still English landscape, with its slightly undulating fields, and patches of common "rough with thickly gorse." Nor was our poet's insight into human life and character very deep. He glanced on the surface of society, and describes the world like a very distant observer; the great heart of human passions was to him comparatively a sealed book. His retired position brought him into close communion with Nature, which developed a constant habit of moralising; and here he was at home. Domestic enjoyments he well understood and appreciated; but the power of evil and social misery were to the poet almost unknown. A few human idiosyncrasies had an existence in his memory; as, for instance, the

parson coxcomb and Crazy Kate, whom he graphically portrays.

In what an easy, natural style Cowper writes—beautiful! The verse runs as smoothly as the ball on a billiard-board; and frequently in his smaller pieces there is such a peculiar terseness both of thought and expression, that you are suddenly and completely captivated. Instance the “Epistle to Joseph Hill, Esq.,” and “Pairing-time Anticipated,” which are real gems in their way. In 1784 appeared “The Task,” the highest effort of Cowper’s muse. All the world knows the origin of this beautiful production. Lady Austen, a particular friend of the poet’s, once pressed him to write a poem in blank verse. He hesitated, and pleaded as an excuse his want of a subject. “Poets,” says Lady Austen, “can find a topic in anything. Write about this sofa.” He did so, taking the sofa as a sort of starting point.

“He travels and expatiates; as the bee
From flower to flower, so he from land to land;
The manners, customs, policy of all
Pay contribution to the store he gleans.”

You will have thought, I dare say, what an interesting companion Cowper must have been. Yes; with all his gloom and melancholy and reserve, there is something in such a nature to inspire love. He gives us—in one of his letters to Mr Unwin—a companion *par excellence*. “You are not acquainted with the Rev. Mr Bull of Newport?—perhaps it is as well for you that you are not. You would regret still more than you do that there are so many miles

interposed between us. He spends part of the day with us to-morrow. A dissenter, but a liberal one; a man of letters and of genius; master of a fine imagination, or rather not master of it—an imagination which, when he finds himself in the company he loves, and can confide in, runs away with him into such fields of speculation, as amuse and enliven every other imagination that has the happiness to be of the party. At other times he has a tender and delicate sort of melancholy in his disposition, not less agreeable in its way. No men are better qualified for companions in such a world as this, than men of such a temperament. Every scene of life has two sides, a dark and a bright one, and the mind that has an equal mixture of melancholy and vivacity is best of all qualified for the contemplation of either. He can be lively without levity, and pensive without sullenness. Such a man is Mr Bull. But nothing is perfect—he smokes tobacco.” And just such a friend is Cowper, omitting of course the tobacco. We have conversed together for hours. Many a beautiful ramble through the country have we had.

“How oft upon yon eminence our pace
Has slackened to a pause, and we have borne
The ruffling wind, scarce conscious that it blew;
While admiration, feeding at the eye,
And still unsated, dwelt upon the scene.”

A splendid prospect—

“The sloping land recedes into the clouds,
Displaying on its varied side the grace
Of hedgerow beauties numberless, square tower,

Tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells
Just undulates upon the listening ear ;
Groves, heaths, and smoking villages, remote."

Roving on—

"Here ankle-deep in moss and flowery thyme,
We mount again, and feel at every step
Our foot half sunk in hillocks green and soft,
Raised by the mole, the miner of the soil."

Upon which Cowper would observe in his moralising way—

"Strange animal,
He, not unlike the great ones of mankind,
Disfigures earth ; and plotting in the dark,
Toils much to earn a monumental pile,
That may record the mischiefs he has done."

We climb the mountain, and as—

"The summit gain'd, behold the proud alcove
That crowns it,"—

the poet exclaims,—

"Oft have I wished the peaceful covert mine.
'Here,' I have said, 'at least, I should possess
The poet's treasure, silence, and indulge
The dreams of fancy, tranquil and secure."

Myself. "My covetous heart is not so easily
satisfied. How fresh and beautiful Liddon Hall
looks this morning, like a fairy palace embosomed
in trees.

'Often in musings here I've envy'd Ray ;
That winding lake, yon noble house and lawn,
And yonder lands, far as the eye can reach,
Belong to him.'"

Cowper. "But not to him alone—they belong to

all God's creatures ; or, at least, to all who have a soul to enjoy them,—

‘ His are the mountains, and the valleys his,
And the resplendent rivers : his to enjoy
With a propriety that none can feel,
But who, with filial confidence inspired,
Can lift to heaven an unpresumptuous eye,
And smiling, say ‘ My Father made them all.’ ”

Myself. “ What a grotesque but pleasing effect have the sun's rays peering through this beautiful awning ! ”

Cowper. “ So sportive is the light,
Shot through the boughs, it dances as they dance,
Shadow and sunshine intermingling quick.”

Myself. “ This is the gate of heaven ! Oh, that we could impress the emotion into a picture, that it might live with us to-morrow ! How glad all nature seems ! To me it is such a relief to quit for a time the thick, humid atmosphere of the world ; we leave sorrow behind where we leave sin, amid the din and bustle of mankind. Here everything smiles.”

Cowper. “ The innocent are gay,—the lark is gay
That dries his feathers, saturate with dew,
Beneath the rosy cloud, while yet the beams
Of day-spring overshoot his humble nest.”

Myself. “ What is that overhead, Mr Cowper ? It makes a strange chatter.”

Cowper. “ The squirrel, flippant, pert, and full of play ;
He sees me, and at once, swift as a bird,
Ascends the neighbouring beech ; there whisks
his brush,
And perks his ears, and stamps, and cries aloud,
With all the prettiness of feigned alarm.”

Myself. "That creature is cunning as a Christian. When your attention is diverted, he begins to pelt you with nuts ; then, turn but your face menacingly towards him, and how demure-like he sits, as if, forsooth, all had happened by accident. Alas ! alas ! dissimulation is not confined to women. Which do you think highest in the scale of intellect—beasts or birds ? In my opinion, birds are more sentimental ; but there is a great deal of sound sense, besides moral principle, in four-legged animals. Look at an old cow when she gets up in a morning. There's a grave demeanour pictured in that honest face, which says, My first duty is to society : and she is as uneasy as can be until Kitty the milk-maid comes. How happy all things are !"

Cowper. "The heart is hard in nature, and unfit
 For human fellowship that is not pleased
 With sight of animals enjoying life,
 Nor feels their happiness augment his own.
 The bounding fawn that darts across the glade
 When none pursues, through mere delight of
 heart—
 The horse, as wanton and almost as fleet,
 That skims the spacious meadow at full speed,
 Then stops and snorts, and throwing high his
 heels,
 Starts to the voluntary race again ;
 The very kine, that gambol at high noon,
 The total herd receiving, first from one
 That leads the dance, a summons to be gay."

Myself. "What a many things the universe contains !—immense variety ; and each breathes an emotion. Let us sit down here on the grass, and investigate a yard of this infinity. Yes—here will

be about a square yard. There is the stuff called earth. What is that? Has it life? No, no, I did not ask if it jumped about; I thought you were philosopher enough to know that a thing may have life without motion. There is some grass, and some buttercups. Does dirt create the grass? The spirit and germination spring from the earth, and the life goes back into the ground. Look! in the very heart of this flower, a little family of grubs are just born. They are not now alive and kicking. These will all die; but where does the life go?"

Cowper.

"From death to life

Is nature's progress, evincing as she makes
The grand transition, that there lives and works
A soul in all things, and that soul is 'God.'"

Myself.

"Here let us pause, in reverence
Kneel at the goal of truth, and say,
Whatever is, is GOD.
Listen!"

Cowper.

"No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.
Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,
Charms more than silence. Meditation here
May think down hours to moments. Here the
heart
May give a useful lesson to the head,
And learning, wiser grow without his books."

Myself. "I was not going to say that there was a Bedlam; and yet methinks I can distinguish four-and-fifty different sounds, all mixed up together. Let me see—there are the trees, these ring a complete round of changes. You have a fine ear; tell me, then, whether there is not a difference of sound between the ash tree and the fir, the poplar and the

oak? Certainly there is. Then we have the murmuring ripple."

Cowper.

"Of rills that slip

Through the cleft rock, and, chiming as they fall
Upon loose pebbles, lose themselves at length
In matted grass, that with a livelier green
Betrays the secret of their silent course."

Myself. "And, whisht! what short-repeated guffaw is that?—It is something between a shout, a shriek, and a howl; but it may be only the barking of a dog. Then there are at least twenty different tones from—

'The merry tribes of Nature's vocal choir
Whose wildest warbling's sweetest melody:'—

I mean twenty songs of different birds. See, Mr Cowper, our favourite, is still up aloft:

'Yes, that little fairy that lilts so loud,
And hangs on the fringe of a sunny cloud,'

is the sweetest and gladdest of all songsters. Now these, for the most part, are regular continuous sounds. There are others which strike the ear suddenly and at intervals; such, for instance, as the bleating of a sheep, the lowing of an ox, or the ploughman's halloo,—all of which occasionally join in the chorus."

Cowper. "There is in souls a sympathy with sounds,
And as the mind is pitch'd, the ear is pleased;
Some chord in unison with what we hear
Is touch'd within us, and the heart replies.
How soft the music of those village bells,
Falling at intervals upon the ear
In cadence sweet, now dying all away,
Now pealing loud again, and louder still,

Clear and sonorous, as the gale comes on ;
 With easy grace it opens all the cells
 Where Memory slept."

Myself. "The wind is getting up a great deal ; therefore I propose that we be going down. Fine breeze, though ; how it braces the nerves, infusing new life and vigour into the system. Nature, like kingdoms, is occasionally all the better for a good shaking."

Cowper. "Yes ; e'en the oak
 Thrives by the rude concussion of the storm ;
 He seems, indeed, indignant ; and to feel
 The impression of the blast with proud disdain ;
 Frowning, as if in his unconscious arm
 He held the thunder ; but the monarch owes
 His firm stability to what he scorns,
 More fix'd below, the more disturb'd above."

Myself. "And now we are at home."

Cowper. "Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast ;
 Let fall the curtains ; wheel the sofa round ;
 And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn
 Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
 That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
 So let us welcome peaceful evening in !"

Myself. "The wind whistles loudly without, but here there is repose and security ; the world is active without—traders, and pleasure-seekers, and sensualists, are at their favourite haunts—but these are little heeded. And yet"—

Cowper. "'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat
 To peep at such a world—to see the stir
 Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd ;
 To hear the roar she sends through all her gates
 At a safe distance, where the dying sound
 Falls a soft murmur on the uninjured ear."

Myself. "Mr Cowper, you are essentially a por-trayer of social life, and of domestic joys in par-ticular. Draw me the picture of a happy man. I always think that women are happier than men. And why? Because their aspirations harmonise more with the common occupations of life; because they pick the good out of little things. Farewell to peace where the mind cherishes ambition, I care not toward what object. It will 'eat as doth a canker.' The snatches of what feverish joy it yields inflames the pride, and pride ne'er nurtured peace. Time is split up into seconds, and life is composed of flitting joys. Ambition, ever selfish, tries to grasp more than God allots to one individ-ual. Like a person who hastes too fast to be rich, the ambitious man slights assured advantages and present gains; then finds, when his energies are all spent, what a store of happiness was constantly lying in his path. But—what?"

Cowper. "But not to understand a treasure's worth
Till time has stolen away the slighted good,
Is cause of half the poverty we feel,
And makes the world the wilderness it is."

Myself. "The 'Task,' 'Sofa,'—what important and suggestive themes! You answer, I was summoned to the 'Task,' and told that any simple text—a sofa, anything—might be a starting point to expatiate through the world. True, you are chivalrous, and a lady gave the theme. Let us discourse the subtle evolutions, the ever-varying phase of this high argument."

Cowper. "I sing the sofa."

Myself. "I know. And the first great truth you enunciate is that our primitive sires had nothing on their skins but paint. I wonder the lady did not blush."

Cowper. "As yet black breeches were not."

Myself. "True. But I hope that colour was adopted in their stead."

Cowper. "Those barbarous ages past, succeeded next
The birthday of invention . . .
Joint stools were then created, on three legs
Upborne they stood."

Myself. "The next birthday would bring a comfortable cushion."

Cowper. "At length a generation more refined
Improved the simple plan, made three legs four."

Myself. "And so on."

Cowper. "A lattice work now braced
The new machine, and it became a chair,
But restless was the chair, the back erect
Distressed the weary loins that felt no ease ;
The slippery seat betrayed the sliding part
That pressed it."

Myself. "And what a sight !

'As yet black breeches were not.'"

Cowper. "But elbows yet were wanting ; these some say
An alderman of Cripplegate contrived,
But rude at first, and not with easy slope,
Receding wide they pressed against the ribs,
And bruised the side. The ladies first
'Gan murmur, as became the softer sex."

Myself. "No wonder that they murmured ; for, in

its best estate, I always deem the chair a very selfish seat."

Cowper. "So slow the growth of what is excellent, so hard
To attain perfection in this nether world.
Thus first necessity invented stools,
Convenience next suggested elbow chairs,
And luxury the accomplished sofa last."

Myself. "A sofa!—The old times come back. First, childhood's frolics—cutting the cover through with dangerous knife. My gentle mother chides, 'Why did you do it?' When I, forced to confession, answer, 'It was to see underneath what felt so soft.' But there are recollections more vivid, because so sweet. Helen and I sit together there; her dark beaming eyes smile radiantly as I kiss the ruddy lips; her bosom swells with undisguised bliss as I press her to my heart. Mr Cowper, you nestle about as if your seat was uneasy. Were you ever truly in love? Nay, no equivocation, for it is a sober question. There was a certain Theodora. Alas, for fate and human destiny; or rather, woe betide a craven heart! Had you plucked up courage and ran away with the lady, life would have been all smiles; everything like ennui and hypochondriasm would have flown away. What so healthy an excitement as a good romp with children? But here I anticipate. But further, I heard that there were two ladies passing some time ago, and they called in at a shop over the way. You were instantly smitten with one of them, and asked your hostess to invite her to tea. This lady was evidently a real flame at fifty. Before seeing her,

you promised to marry Mrs Unwin, but now allowed yourself to go mad instead ; and when Lady Austen's company would have cured you, in gratitude for Mrs Unwin's motherly care, she was forbidden the house."

Cowper. "What monstrous lies some travellers will tell."

* * * * *

The resolution passing in my mind half an hour ago was to evoke some high criticism upon Cowper's later poems, and here we have been wasting valuable time in chit-chat. Let us return. If a stranger to English poetry were to ask, "Which is the most sublime production of the British muse?" we should undoubtedly say, "Paradise Lost;" if, "Which contained most the graces of rhetoric, with the highest poetic finish?" our reply would probably be less determinate, but we might direct such inquirer to the "Pleasures of Hope," Gray's "Elegy," or the "Princess" and "Locksley Hall" of Tennyson; if, where he might find the richest and the truest descriptions of scenery and the world of nature, we should say, "Read the 'Seasons,'" then study Wordsworth; but if called upon to name a poem which united every excellence of sentiment and diction with the greatest variety, we should, without hesitation, point to "The Task." To furnish examples of the strong manly sense, the exuberant wit, the stinging yet benevolent sarcasm, the high tone of moral and religious principle which this admirable poem exhibits, would be almost to tran-

scribe it entire.* What a vivid and yet truthful picture does he give us of some theatrical clerical coxcomb! How mean and vile it looks beside its counterpart,—

“The legate of the skies. His theme divine,
His office sacred, His credentials clear;
By Him the violated law speaks out
Its thunders; and by Him, in strains as sweet
As angels use, the gospel whispers peace.”

And how tenderly the poet chides the world for its coldness to the memory of those noble souls who vindicated their religion by suffering and death.

“Patriots have toil’d, and in their country’s cause
Bled nobly; and their deeds, as they deserve,
Receive proud recompense.
But martyrs struggle for a brighter prize
And win it with more pain. Their blood is shed
In confirmation of the noblest claim—
Our claim to feed upon immortal truth;
Yet few remember them. They lived unknown,
Till persecution dragg’d them into fame,
And chased them up to heaven. Their ashes flew
No marble tells us whither. With their names
No bard embalms and sanctifies his song;

* The poet’s humour is genial and sound; there is a good purpose even in those light and sportive allusions which so frequently recur. How we admire the natural transition, from apparently a trifling subject, to some great moral and religious truth, seducing the readers’ attention, but concealing the design. It may be objected that the earnest, impassioned tone which Cowper at times assumes, is out of character with the comparatively trivial nature of the subject; and that he frequently adopts, towards what at most are but foibles, a tone of censure more applicable to moral delinquency.

And history—so warm on meaner things—
Is cold on this."

And what a gush of noble, generous sentiment, of mingled indignation, pity, and love, bursts out in the following apostrophe,—

"Oh, for a lodge in some vast wilderness !
Some boundless contiguity of shade,
Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
Of unsuccessful or successful war,
Might never reach me more. My ear is pain'd," &c.

Second only to the world's great master, Shakespeare, in the one respect of versatility, whatever style Cowper attempts, success is equally certain. Which is the most prominent feature of his writings—is it imagination? That certainly is fertile, exuberant, graceful. Is it emotion? His sensibilities are warm, deep, broad. Is it strength of mind? He takes a large and comprehensive grasp of his subject, seizing it at once, as if by intuition, in all its bearings, and scrutinising even its minutest effects. Is it the lively playfulness of his wit? or the caustic pungency of his satire? Is it his command of language, or inimitable power of description? Which of these varied and distinguished features predominates? We can scarcely tell: our poet is great by the union of each and all. The names of Milton and Cowper have not unfrequently been mingled together. "What a contrast," some one will say. In many respects they are. It is true there seldom throbs in Cowper's breast the deep, profound, unutterable emotion. Equalling Milton in power of description, he employs his

faculties on lowlier themes. He takes his observations from a different altitude. His muse's wing, though strong, seldom plumes itself for an elevated flight. In Cowper we lament the absence of a deep, ingrained, soul-absorbing purpose. Literature was made an amusement, and not the cherished object of his life. Most of his pieces were undertaken to gratify a passing whim, to beguile the hours of despondency, or to please his friends. And yet there are points of analogy between these two great national poets. Milton made Christian themes almost the exclusive subjects of his muse; so did Cowper. Thus we see they both drew their inspiration from the same source. Milton deferred his poetic labours until age shed experience on his path; so did Cowper. Milton was the first Christian poet who preferred any just claim to immortality; Cowper followed, and, animated by the same great principles, but in a widely different course, originated a new epoch in the history of poetic literature, producing one poem, at least, which has found many imitators, but no equal. The last work our poet attempted and completed was a translation of Homer in blank verse, which, for correct literal rendering is superior, and for grace and beauty, scarcely beneath any kindred production.

Cowper died April 25, 1800.

BURNS.

BURNS.

It is no easy matter to interest the reader in a subject upon which so much has been said, and said well. The poet's history is so well known, his personal character, and the character of his writings are now so generally understood, that it is almost impossible to find anything to say which is new. "Then why again intrude Burns upon our notice?" For two reasons. We have loved him from childhood, sincerely and earnestly, and are thus in a measure constrained to utter what we feel. If there be one name more than another consecrated by associations as pleasurable as they are vivid, and as numerous as they are strong, it is the name of Burns. Secondly, because he is emphatically a *poet of the people*. If there be one man who can justly claim the distinction of "national poet," whose magic influence is felt from the cottage to the throne, it is Burns. The rich and learned read him with admiration and delight; they are astonished that such ennobling sentiments, such high-toned sensibility, can be irradiated around the peasant's lowly ingle; the poor love him—and no wonder, for he was one

of themselves—they both glory and are glorified in him.

I have sometimes thought, What a pity Providence did not bless him with a more propitious lot. But it might have been worse for the world. It is emphatically true of Burns—

“He learn’t in suffering what he taught in song.”

He would, no doubt, have been a happier man ; but we should have wanted many of those tender, thrilling bursts of feeling which the force of circumstances alone impelled. The condition of Burns as a cottage youth was not to poetry uncongenial. Here, at least, we might look for unsophisticated truth, while the heart had free scope to make homely joys attractive. In great thoroughfares of life, the tide of popular events is apt to force men’s utterances to insincerity, until selfish expediency becomes an acknowledged law. The true life is best nourished in rural solitudes, and particularly in such localities where Nature can command by her grandeur. Nor should we, perhaps, murmur at the comparative scantiness of Burns’s scholastic training. The poet’s imagination was not smothered under a heap of knowledge, nor his invention crippled by conventional forms. He would, doubtless, with application and perseverance, have excelled in any department of letters ; he might have combined his poetic fire with classic adornings, and captivated as much by his literary erudition as the depth and brilliancy of his genius. But it may be that, with such advantages, he would scarcely have been known as a poet.

The common impression is, that scholarship means mental and moral growth; that education must necessarily be the groundwork of all excellent attainments. Many people say this who have evidently no right understanding of the term. Messrs General Public, there may be an education very important of which you take but little note. Technical education in our day is thoroughly appreciated; hence we are essentially a mechanical people. We know, also, that if one will master the classics, or any foreign language, he must commit to memory words with their signification. A particular science or mechanical art is only satisfactorily attained after much elementary learning; but the study of hexameters will never make a true poet. The divine gift does indeed well consort with measured rhythm, and mellifluous periods; and yet these latter are but the body of poetry. The true afflatus can never become conventional. But must not a poet study Nature? Yes. Yet even here the exercise is usually an involuntary emotion. Your versifier may be the most scientific botanist, or mineralogist, or naturalist, in the world; still it is questionable if this technical knowledge alone would assist his muse. Even ærial Pegasus might become a veritable pack-horse under the accumulation of all this elementary load.

Burns, as every one knows, was cradled in adversity, his early life being one continued scene of poverty and lowly toil. In the rural districts of Scotland there is, or was when Burns was young, a class of itinerary schoolmasters, who, although dis-

pensing little Latin, and less Greek, are full of national historic lore, which the cottars value most. These men are boarded and lodged by turns in the "auld clay biggins" where they teach, and one of these had some merit in teaching Burns to read and write. Afterwards he was sent for a few weeks to the schoolmaster of Ayr (John Murdoch), who grounded his pupil in English grammar, and gave him a slight smattering of French besides. His schoolmaster, however, discovered in Robert Burns no peculiar imagination; he could never teach him a tune in church psalmody, because he had no ear to music; and, certainly, saw nothing native in him which gave a glimpse of the future poet. But the genius was there, nevertheless, in some nebulous condition, waiting for development. The passion of first love developed it. Burns says—

"You know our country custom of coupling a man and a woman together as partners in the labours of harvest. In my fifteenth autumn, my partner was a bewitching creature, a year younger than myself. My scarcity of English denies me the power of doing her justice in that language; but you know the Scottish idiom—she was a *bonnie, sweet, sonsie lass*. In short, she altogether, unwittingly to herself, initiated me in that delicious passion, which, in spite of acid disappointment, gin-horse prudence, and book-worm philosophy, I hold to be the first of human joys, our dearest blessing here below! How she caught the contagion I cannot tell: you medical people talk much of infection from breathing the same air, the touch, &c.; but I never expressly said I loved her. Indeed I did not know myself why I liked to loiter behind with her, when returning in the evening from our labours; why the tones of her voice made my heart-strings thrill like an Æolian harp; and particularly why my pulse beat such a furious ratan when

I looked and fingered over her little hand to pick out the cruel nettle-stings and thistles. Among her other love-inspiring qualities, she sung sweetly ; and it was her favourite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme. . . . *Thus with me began love and poetry.*"

The father, old William Burns, was a worthy companion and tutor to his family ; and well was his paternal care requited, for both Robert and Gilbert were dutiful, industrious sons. But nothing appeared to prosper with them. Lochlea was unpropitious, Mount Oliphant proved sterile, and the father, bowed down, more with toil and care than years, was fast wearing to the grave. Although their situation was very lonely—cut off from association with all companions of their own age—still there was an un murmuring sense of duty in the lads, for they saw that nothing but hard work could stave off ruin. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three, Robert tried hard to raise himself a little in the world, and having saved a few pounds, he entered into partnership with a man in the flax line. All his life long had toil and care been present with him, but hard work was hallowed by integrity and a good conscience : now came the degradation. While learning to be a flax-dresser at Irvine, he was led into jovial company, took whisky as an antidote to care, and gave the rein to sensual passions. Six months had scarcely passed before their little property in the flax-trade was destroyed by fire. But this was not the worst ; troubles came thick and fast ; he returned home to labour again with his father, just at the time when a law-suit,

pending between the elder Burns and his landlord, was decided in favour of the latter, and the old man only escaped the horrors of a jail by death. Their affairs were now a complete wreck. Robert and Gilbert were left with a legacy of five younger children to battle with the world. And manfully did they strive. Another farm (Mosgiel), was entered upon, and, as Gilbert tells us, Robert devoted all the energies of body and mind towards rendering it productive. Here again his evil genius frowned upon him, the land was hungry and sterile, and after experiencing one or two bad harvests, they were obliged to quit.

It is strange how one event affects another by some mysterious law of association, and how closely are assimilated the circumstances and character of the man. Had farming been propitious, even this erratic genius might have settled into a respectable, self-righteous, and money-grubbing man. Had he married Jean Armour at first, instead of seducing her, he might never have risen above the condition of a cottar, or small tenant farmer; but the reward of social and domestic duties would have satisfied his life. The kirk might then have gained a member, but the world would have lost its poet,—so, at least, certain writers have thought and said. But here we must guard our readers against error. Is genius invariably erratic, and with its development must we necessarily associate the life of a vagabond? To my mind, such suppositions are degrading as they are false. Revelling and debauchery did not, nor ever can, promote poetry; the latter sprang

rather from the true nature of Burns asserting its native dignity, not unfrequently in hours of remorse. Still some one may say, Only from such experiences could arise such aspirations. This is false doctrine. As well may we thank God for evil and for sin, after having been once delivered from their power.

Poor Burns! the yearnings of his soul were after the enjoyments of domestic bliss. He long and ardently looked forward to a period when he might woo in comfort, and take the delight of his eyes to such a home as he has more than once so graphically described. But he could hope no longer; his ruined fortunes, combined with an unfortunate love affair, drove him to desperation; he resolved to quit his native land, and embark for Jamaica. Here, however, an obstacle presented itself—he had no money and no means of securing his passage. What was he to do? It is true he had by him five or six poems, and a few odd scraps of song such as the peasants love, and more than one of his humble friends had suggested that, if they were arranged and printed, the project would be “nae ill ta’en.” Burns, therefore, in order to raise sufficient money to pay his passage to Jamaica, resolved to collect and publish his juvenile poems. The idea took, and by this means the author became possessed of nearly £20. And now he turned his eyes to the Indies—but the young poet shall tell his own tale,—

“This sum [received from the publisher at Kilmarnock] came very seasonably, as I was thinking of indenting myself for want of money to procure my passage. As soon as I was master of nine guineas, the price of wafting me to

the torrid zone, I took a steerage passage in the first ship that was to sail from the Clyde, for hungry ruin had me in the wind. I had been for some days skulking from covert to covert, under all the terrors of a jail, as some ill-advised people had uncoupled the merciless pack of the law at my heels, [to compel him to maintain, or give security for the maintenance of, his twin children by Jean Armour]. I had taken farewell of my few friends; my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed the last song I should ever measure in Caledonia [‘The gloomy night is gathering fast’], when a letter from Dr Blacklock to a friend of mine overthrew all my schemes, by opening new prospects to my poetic ambition. The doctor belonged to a set of critics for whose applause I had not dared to hope. His opinion that I should meet with encouragement in Edinburgh for a second edition, fired me so much, that away I posted for that city, without a single acquaintance, or a single letter of introduction.”

Thus, we perceive how those few generous and well-timed lines fixed the poet’s destiny. Instead of fleeing an outcast from his native shores, he proceeded to Edinburgh, where he was courted by the gifted and feasted by the noble; and when a new edition of his poems was issued under splendid patronage, the poor ploughman realised no less than £500. There is a saying of Hans Christian Andersen, that people suffer a great deal of adversity, and then they become famous.

But no effect rises without an adequate cause; it was not because Burns was poor and miserable that society noticed him. Were this all, he might have gone to the Indies, and whipped “niggers” until the day of his death, for what any literary coteries would have cared. Their attention, however, had been respectably directed to a volume

of poems, small in bulk, but unparalleled in merit, and society was all agape to witness this natural curiosity—a poet-ploughman. Burns sustained the public ordeal well. Some rustic guise he certainly did show, but the manners and dialect of even the best circles in Scotland were at this time not super-refined; and our poet had too much manliness to lose self-possession. Thus, while his bearing was equally remote from impudence as obsequiousness, he gained the respect of all sensible men. Burns's countenance betrayed the man of genius, and commanded attention, while for eloquence and ready wit, our rustic bard could hold his own at any social board. Philosophers like Dugald Stewart were astonished at the quickness of his perception; in Burns even the brilliant Erskine found his mate, while ladies of title were captivated by his fresh, genuine, unaffected discourse. True, it did happen (as it always will) that mean rank and purse-proud arrogance were offended; but no man cared openly to display his superciliousness in Burns's presence.

Every author writes his own history. You will find the index of a man's characteristics in his writings. He may strain after the beautiful and the good; but it is easy to tell whether the inspiration springs from genius or indigestion. He may counterfeit emotions for the occasion, "to mimic sorrow when the heart's not sad;" but the tissue will be far too thin to hide the hypocrisy beneath it, and we retire with a vivid conviction that the distance is very considerable between true poetry and bathos. I will go further. Watch narrowly,

and you may even trace the development of private character. A man's writings are a photograph on which every mood of the mind is permanently impressed. Let us examine those of Burns, and trace out the delineation. And here I would just observe, in commencing, that the portrait is plain and legible, the lines are not faint but clear, and the shadows full. There is a distinctiveness, an individuality about it which answers exactly to the man. Let not the reader misunderstand me. I do not mean to affirm that there is much of evenness, of uniformity, or steady resolution in Burns's character,—the reverse is glaringly apparent; perhaps one more volatile never existed; his whole life being a succession of varying impulses. It was this versatile disposition which prevented his settling for long together to any project; and hence even his poems are most of them short, such as a single heat might almost prompt and inspire. But this feature in his character in no degree beclouds the reflex of Burns's own image in his works; all is open, clear, perspicuous; you have not to hesitate a moment to consider in what category to place him. There is no ambiguity, no low cunning or deception in Burns; he lays open the workings of his heart at every step. He was, as he happily describes himself, made up of "a few of Nature's instincts, untaught and untutored by art." Let us take another short glance at Burns's personal history. His birth-place was an old clay cottage, so dilapidated that one night, while he was an infant, the roof

gave way, and he had to be carried out in haste to a neighbour's house for shelter. Almost before he could read, one Jenny Wilson, an old woman who resided with the family, crammed his head with fairy tales and legendary lore. Then, after he could read well, the first books, except the Bible, which chance put into his hands, were lives of Hannibal and Sir William Wallace, exciting young Burns to mimic the soldier's art, and muse on the glory of conquest. When Robert had just entered into his teens, he was sent, together with his brother Gilbert, to school by turns, week about; and this expedient was adopted partly that the services of one might be secured at the farm, but principally because the expense of both could not be afforded. As before stated, Burns had learned a very small portion of French, and he was at times somewhat vain of this acquirement. On one occasion he attempted a *tête-à-tête* with a French lady in her native tongue, and began with a compliment, as he supposed, on her superior attainments. Burns, however, only succeeded in acquainting her that she was the most *loquacious* of women; to which the lady indignantly replied that he was the most impertinent of youths. At home the family lived very poorly, butcher's meat for years being unknown in their house; and yet amidst hard work, and all this scant, came the factor's insolent letters, which used to make them weep. Years pass on, and we find Robert first toiling with his father for £7 per annum; then comes his first initiation into

intemperance, when, at nineteen years of age, he went to learn geometry, mensuration, &c., at a village where many smugglers resided; afterwards, a brief season of flax-shingling and conviviality at Irvine; then home again to witness the climax of family misfortunes, and his father's death. Burns says of his father:—"I have met with few who understood men, their manners and their ways, equal to him; but stubborn ungainly integrity, and headlong, ungovernable irascibility, are disqualifying circumstances; consequently I was born a very poor man's son." Burns inherited much of his father's spirit; was "soon irritated, but not easily broken;" and who can tell the influence those painful circumstances, which enshrouded his early life, had upon his future character. Years afterwards he wrote:—"My indignation yet boils at the recollection of the factor's insolent threatening letters, which used to set us all in tears." Thus passed, what some would term the delicious season of youth. Up to this period the most powerful and prevailing sentiment of his nature was an idolatry of the fair sex. Cut off, almost, from communion with books and men, his mind was ever roving after some rustic female beauty within the circle of his acquaintance or casual observation. Thus when the hard labour of the day was past, his chief solace was in those cherished interviews with the object of his admiration. Dearly did he love to "kiss a bonny lass coming through the rye." We must pass over the sin with his "darling Jean,"

which brought much shame and misery to both. If, indeed, his affections were by turns ardent and fickle, the heart of Burns was never debased. When circumstances enabled him to keep a wife, he did what honour and duty commanded—married Jean Armour, who had suffered so much on his account. Nor had our poet ever occasion to regret his decision, for in weal or woe, all through that fitful life, she cherished her husband with affectionate, dutiful care. Hear his own testimony anent the matter :—

“ Your surmise, madam, is just ; I am indeed a husband. I found a once much-loved, and still much-loved female, literally and truly cast out to the mercy of the naked elements, but as I enabled her to purchase a shelter ; and there is no sporting with a fellow creature’s happiness or misery. The most placid good-nature and sweetness of disposition ; a warm heart, gratefully devoted with all its powers to love me ; vigorous health and sprightly cheerfulness, set off to the best advantage, by a more than common handsome figure ; these, I think, in a woman, may make a good wife, though she should never have read a page, but *the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*, nor have danced in a brighter assembly than a penny pay-wedding.”

It was, after all, a great personal comfort that Burns could enliven his toil with poetry. Placed in a position which could yield little stimulus to ambitious hope, our bard did occasionally resort to expedients which some might consider foolish, and others condemn as impertinent :—he addressed congratulatory letters to certain ladies whose superior personal charms, or mental accomplishments, en-

abled them to adorn the high social position in which they were placed. To Miss ——, Burns thus commences an epistle—

“MOSSGIEL, 18th Nov. 1786.

“MADAME,—Poets are such *outré* beings, so much the children of wayward fancy and capricious whim, that I believe the world generally allows them a larger latitude in the laws of propriety, than the sober sons of judgment and prudence. I mention this as an apology for the liberties that a nameless stranger has taken with you in the enclosed poem, which he begs leave to present you with. Whether it has poetical merit any way worthy of the theme, I am not the proper judge; but it is the best my abilities can produce; and what to a good heart will perhaps be superior grace, it is equally sincere as fervent.” . . .

The accompanying verses—the “Lass of Ballochmyle”—are very beautiful, and have been read by thousands; but Burns was chagrined at the time, that his fair subject sent no acknowledgment to the author. No doubt, Miss —— felt herself placed in a very delicate position. Certain personal proclivities were manifested in the fourth verse, which might well make any high-born lady pause; and Miss ——, not knowing Burns’s sterling disinterestedness, might think within herself, “Suppose I avow to the poet admiration for his tribute, might not such favour encourage futile hopes? Silence is best.”

Unblest with literary stores, imagination had no field to rove in except nature and the world within him, but there germinated the finest impulses and the warmest passions; while the poet, to ease his throbbing breast, poured forth his hopes and loves, his joys and sorrows, spontaneously in song. Thus

it is that his writings strike us at once as the offspring of personal individual feelings; of his lyrics, in particular, almost every sentiment is a phase of his own experience. Could any one but a lover have written those lines addressed to "Mary in Heaven," or more particularly, "Highland Mary?"

"How sweetly bloom'd the gay green birk,
How rich the hawthorn's blossom,
As underneath its fragrant shade,
I clasp'd her to my bosom.
The golden hours on angel's wings
Flew o'er me and my dearie;
For dear to me as light and life
Was my sweet Highland Mary."

Burns was passionately fond of Mary Morison; he thus commemorates her in another song, from which we extract the following lines. What a picture of constancy!—

"Yestreen when to the trembling string,
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha';
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard nor saw;
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town;
I sigh'd, and said, among them a',
Ye are na Mary Morison."

The principal subjects of his songs are a love of nature and a love of women; but the two are often mingled, and many a pretty picture of this sort has he given us.

"O, luve will venture in, where it daur na' weel be seen,
O, luve will venture in, where wisdom ance has been,
But I will down yon river rove, among the wood sae green;
And a' to pu' a posie to my ain dear May," &c.

The following, too, is very sprightly :—

“There’s nought but care on every han’,
 In every hour that passes, O !
 What signifies the life o’ man
 An’ ’twere na for the lasses, O ?
 Green grow the rushes !
 Green grow the rushes, O !
 The sweetest hours that e’er I spend
 Are spent among the lasses, O !”

“Yes, it’s pretty,” says a man of analysis and synthesis; “but what has the chorus to do with the song, ‘Green grow the rushes?’ I do not see the connection.” Probably not, and this owing to a peculiar mental aberration. Suppose we enlighten the eyes of his understanding? Well, we will. It is an axiom in mental philosophy that one idea follows another, according to the law of association; Burns’s mind, no doubt, when he wrote this song, reverted back to past seasons and delights, for he says,—

“Gie me a canny hour at e’en,
 My arms about my dearie, O !”

and here we approach a solution of the difficulty—our poet, like a modest, diffident young man, would blush to obtrude his amorous enjoyments before the public gaze; and so they retired, he and the object of his love, to some shady jungle. A very shallow acquaintance with botany will enable the reader to perceive that the plant under consideration luxuriates in such situations, and hence the ejaculation. The poet, with a heart warmed by the kindling embrace, encloses even the inferior creation within

the grasp of his sympathies—his pent-up feelings break out in chorus,—

“Green grow the rashes, O!”

I am not surprised that so many readers feel a pleasure in biography, for there they see, as in a mirror, the reflex of themselves. Who, while studying human character in all its phases, has not been impressed with the conviction that mankind are one? Look at this question seriously, because it is not so much a beautiful hypothesis as an irresistible truth. Have not all a common interest in each individual experience? Are not human sympathies and impulses the common property of man? Yes, we are one; social and moral ties cement us together. And yet, it will be said, this mighty mechanism of man is a complex thing. So it is, only there is variety in unity. The parts may be various, the movements diverse, there may even be apparent incongruity, opposition, disorder, but there is no isolation. Each human life, yea, every individual action, is an essential thread, helping to form that universal web we call *society*. True, it is only when the soul is beautiful that we can perceive the beauty of design. If we look beyond the embodied form into the inner life, we shall find that poetry *per se* is the divine image of beauty; and yet its development, to outward appearance, is often strange and diverse. What a heterogeneous family is the race called poets. There are some who seem ever to bask on the sunny side of life, others grow up within the gloom. Some make a Paradise all

around them, evolving everywhere the genial influences of the heart; others, morbid and misanthropic themselves, scarcely ever come across a joy without corroding it. Some revel *con amore* among the bright things God has given us; others unfold the deep, dark abysses of crime, find a strange pleasure in stirring up the dregs of humanity, and feasting their eyes on the miseries of the world. Some, without chart or compass, launch themselves on the vortex, in a sea of troubles, with no other object, apparently, than the maddening excitement of combating the angry surge. Some are hasty, jealous, resentful; others, patient, mild, forgiving, are like a beautiful flower, which, when crushed and trampled upon, will still yield a sweet perfume. Thus it is. And yet poetry is one word, and beauty means the same thing. Think, reader. There arises here a lesson in ethics which has never been thoroughly understood. Satan was once an angel of light; and, despite all that after-pride and waywardness, which made the transformation dreadful, the divine image is there still. Cain and Abel had the breath of Adam, which was the breath of God; and yet one of these sons became a pattern of goodness, while the other became a murderer and a vagabond. All this difference of result took its rise in some adventitious circumstance, which at first might seem trifling, but which, voluntarily cherished, at length overpowered the will. It would seem as if we could not separate the character of a man from the circumstances of his lot; although we feel that the true glory of humanity consists in

vindicating the eternal goodness, and keeping the honour bright. But may we not greatly err in estimating the *human* character of these divine sons of genius? If your comparative anatomist can reorganise the complete skeleton from a single bone, has the biographer equal data in deciphering human character from a shred of sentiment or an isolated fact? This would be possible, no doubt, if we possessed that gift which the Scriptures speak of as a "discerning of spirits;" but the logic of fireside talk is inadequate. The schoolman's method is sufficient for material analysis. This piece of bone is an ocular and determinate thing. From its conformation your student knows that the next bone, to assimilate, must have a certain form or character; and so on, until the entire structure is remodelled. In like manner, one is enabled to judge of the habits and generic class of an animal from its conformation, generalising on these matters to a great length with some degree of precision. But mental character is like the wind, that subtlest material agent, "which bloweth where it listeth, and we hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth." Although the great "Searcher of hearts" alone can understand perfectly what is in man, and we often err in estimating the true character from isolated circumstances, still, to a large extent, the proposition will hold good that every author writes his own history. To resume our analysis, then, What does Burns teach?

I. *Sensibility and simplicity allied.*—Burns in-

herited from his father a melancholy and foreboding temperament, aggravated under peculiar and trying circumstances. He was always acutely susceptible to outward influences, so that his life showed all the impulsive waywardness of a child. Kind words and generous actions from others would suddenly melt his heart in gratitude, while supercilious neglect, or envious detraction spontaneously roused in him an indignation which he never sought to restrain. A child of nature, he had not been schooled and disciplined into conventional propriety. It may be that the temperament of genius is like an iodised plate, which is constantly receiving photographs of external objects; so that the transitions from brightness to gloom will frequently be sudden, and sometimes extreme. But the pictures are often very beautiful—noontide splendour on the mountain top, with glints of light peering down through a chasm of trees into the valley, and some transcendent object of human loveliness occupying all the foreground. As with other men of genius the transpositions from joy to gloom in Burns's mind were not only sudden, but vivid in the extreme. Hence the spirit of humour and satire made him gesticulate like a fool; hence many a sober-minded Scot, who happened to see Burns in these moods, jumped to the conclusion that he was either drunk or crazed. When misfortunes thickened around him, his genius grew more turbulent, having fewer seasons of quiet satisfaction or meditative repose.

Sensibility is the most essential qualification of


a lyrical poet; in the department of lyrical poetry, Burns has had few rivals and no superior. Still many people entertain the idea that song-writing is the easiest of all metrical compositions—they are sadly mistaken, for in no sphere is excellence more difficult of attainment. A song is less dependent upon art and more upon passion; the sentiment must have breadth and depth or its superficialities are easily visible. Our best songs have evidently arisen spontaneously as the product of powerful emotion; even the language is such as would be dictated by the impulse of the moment. Dulness, dry detail, or common-place description are intolerable in a song. Burns possessed the qualifications of a lyrical poet in a high degree. His imagination was lively and strong, but its development being restricted almost entirely to his own personal experience, there is in it all the simplicity of nature. Burns had little consanguinity with the inhabitants of dream-land; his fancy's wing did not propel him into regions of airy, unsubstantial pageantry—he had no sympathy with myths and mythology; we discover in him no philosophical niceties, no wire-drawn distinctions. His heroes and heroines, noble they may be, and invested with the highest charms, are still beings of honest flesh and blood, who preserve their relations to the real and tangible. Burns, also, possessed much artistic power. It is something to have a keen sense of the beautiful; it is the sign and prerogative of nobler faculties, to catch a glimpse of beauty from external things, and assimilate it to the soul; but this is not enough—the

poet must reproduce the image and its associations in a more permanent form, which our Scottish bard has done to perfection. Nature had ever been his chosen companion ; in boyhood his delight was to wander forth—

“ Young fancy’s rays the hills adorning ;

but as sexual passions strengthened, some blushing lass (comely and prosaic enough to ordinary vision) was enshrined a goddess amidst this sylvan beauty ; thus, as I said before, the objective materials of his song are “ a love of nature and a love of women.” All this is very natural and simple.

Simplicity is sensibility’s pure native language, and in days to come we shall have more of it in the poetry of the times ; the language of our lyrics will be like the overflowings of brave, honest, loving hearts in every-day life ; not mechanical, and prim, and pretty, but speaking great and holy truths in simple, homely phrase. I am glad to perceive that the world is changing its opinions respecting poetry. We have too long confounded the language of the heart with stilted conventionality or worse declamation. People never were designed to play such antics as we find in verse, and they rarely do in real life. Nothing will stop the senseless jingle which a host of Malvinas and man-milliners crowd into our current literature, but a truer appreciation of poetry. If these ladies, instead of stringing together epithets about “ azure skies ” and “ pearly tears,” would wait until a real truth was not only imagined, but felt, and which, perhaps, the heart is silently maturing in adversity, men and women



would have something to thank them for. Wait, then, until some ebullition of grief or joyous feeling would gush forth from the heart, and then, above all things, speak plain. A simple picture, or a breathing line, often produces more effect than a whole page of interjections and notes of exclamation. Our strongest emotions are generally the quietest, and there are sorrows that "do lie too deep for tears." Now, one would think that what arises as the spontaneous language of emotion would incite, instantly and always, a corresponding reciprocity in the reader. But this is not always the case; poetry, like all other things, is effected in its development by prejudice and preconceived opinion. The rhyming world has generally shown itself very jealous for the honour of classic precedents; hence, when Wordsworth first issued his beautiful, simple lyrical pieces, the critics received them with an obstreperous burst of derision. But they laughed too soon; simple unsophisticated men are often better judges of true pathos than the book men; and now, perhaps, there is no part of Wordsworth's writings more read and appreciated than his ballads. Look at the little poem, "We are seven," which, as De Quincy well said, "brings into day, for the first time, a profound fact in the abysses of human nature—namely, that the mind of an infant cannot admit the idea of death any more than the fountain of light can comprehend the aboriginal darkness." Furthermore, what does Burns teach?

II. *Much genial heartedness and a large measure*

of benevolence.—The man, by nature and habits a recluse, who would at any time rather indulge his own companionship than go to a party, is comparatively little affected by fame. But Burns had to pass through a dangerous ordeal. After being *fêted* by the lovely and feasted by the rich, was it likely that he could go back with zest to his lowly toil, there to rusticate upon a bare subsistence with “wife and weans?” Fortunately, or unfortunately, while in the height of his popularity, a second edition of his poems was called for, and this realised to the author nearly £500; a dangerous sum of money to be suddenly thrown into the hands of a man who had toiled hard many years for £7 per annum. Of course he must now see the world, or such portions of it as lay between his new home of Ellisland and Edinburgh. But, first of all, there were claims to be satisfied. He had a good old mother living, who thought less of prosperity than the effect it might have upon her son. When he came home a comparatively rich man, she held up her hands in amazement, saying, “Oh, Robert!” But Robert had formed in his heart a good resolution. His brother Gilbert had entered into another compact, and was still struggling with the farm at Mossiel, which was a home for their mother, and a temporary domicile for Jean, our poet’s wife; so the successful poet and quondam exciseman divided all that money into two parts, giving half to his brother Gilbert, and retaining the other half himself. In effect Robert said thus:—If the farm should *eventually* prosper and I shall have need, pay me

back; if not, thou wilt still only have a brother for thy creditor. Then for six months after he had married Jean Armour, Robert Burns led a somewhat roving life. One plea was that their new house at Ellisland was in course of erection, and the tenant must be continually passing backwards and forwards to superintend the building; but a truer reason was that the poet loved society, because society courted him: he liked, also, the personal rencontres of wit, for here his superiority was acknowledged. So envious people, who themselves can impart a genial ray to no companionship, said, sneeringly—"Yes, he likes to be cock o' the midden; he has, also, acquired a passion for strong drink." Let us look in charity at the facts. When the Ayrshire ploughman became a national poet, neighbours and countrymen strove for his society. After being lionised by the rich and noble, it gratified a generous impulse in himself that he should not reject the overtures of those whom he could honour by his company,

"And take a cup of kindness yet
For auld lang syne."

They repayed his good-humour by pressing him to drink, hence the origin of many exaggerated tales of bacchanalian orgies at cross-country hostleries and village taverns. Strange that our social impulses should be almost invariably associated with drinking! But the result of all this eleemosynary generosity was baneful, for it nurtured habits and tendencies which led surely to ruin. No one saw

the consequences more clearly, or manifested greater remorse after a debauch, than our poet. Often did he resolve to give up these carousals, and bestow more undivided attention upon the legitimate duties of life. I have it from a gentleman, whose ancestor was acquainted with the poet, that he has been known resolutely to pass one of his old haunts, although a familiar face had beckoned to him from the window—walked on for a hundred yards or more, and then suddenly pause, saying to himself, “This resolution of mine is worth a dram ; I will go back and get just one dram.” It happened to require a greater resolution, however, to resist taking a second ; the consequence was, finding the company very congenial, that he “made a night of it.” At length, Burns made the fatal discovery that he needed alcoholic stimulants to counteract a growing nervous depression. Your quiet, comfortable, money-making people know little of the wear and tear which the efforts of genius produce. It is true in some natures, however, that impassioned thought results in an enervation approaching almost to imbecility ; hence, many resort to instantaneous and artificial stimulants, which must ultimately prove the ruin of what they are designed to support. Scores of our ablest men, both as orators and as writers, have braced themselves for greater efforts by drinking wine and spirits. For a time, it may be, the effect is to intensify a momentary power ; but that result cannot repeatedly be attained without a large increase of alcohol, which will at length *inevitably* weaken the mental faculties, and create

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physical disease. But enough of this; our poet's genial disposition loved to see and make people happy. As he truthfully said, "If I could—and I believe I do as far as I can—I would wipe away all tears from all eyes." Can a man be unsound at core of whom this testimony is true? Certainly not. When I was but a boy, my pert little sister used to quote this aphorism, "Self-praise is no *condemnation*," ignorantly miscalling the key-word of the sentence. In Burns's case, however, this singular version would be perfectly applicable. He did a man good without asserting his own self-importance, or awakening in the recipient a hypocritical whine of humility; not, however, without neglecting the opportunity to offer sensible, manly advice. A letter, in Burns's handwriting, has recently been published for the first time in some local Scottish journal. This epistle was given by Mrs Begg of Tranent, the poet's sister, to a Mr F——, whose son now has it in possession:—

"ELLISLAND, *August 14, 1789.*

"MY DEAR WILLIAM,—I received your letter, and am very happy to hear that you have got settled for the winter. I inclose you the two guinea notes of the Bank of Scotland, which I hope will serve your need. It is, indeed, not quite so convenient for me to spare money as it once was, but I know your situation, and I will say it in some respect your worth. I have no time to write at present, but I beg you will endeavour to pluck up a little more of the man than you used to have. Remember my favourite quotation,—

‘On reason build resolve,
That column of true majesty in man;
What proves the hero truly great
Is never, never to despair.’

Your mother and sister beg their compliments. A Dieu je vous commende.
ROBERT BURNS."

And yet the question again recurs in a somewhat different form. Supposing Burns had got into the respectable, conventional grove, would he too have graduated into the churl? He must have asked himself this very question, and decided in the negative,—

"What, my dear Cunningham, is there in riches, that they narrow and harden the heart so? I think, were I as rich as the sun, I should be as generous as the day; but as I have no reason to imagine my soul a nobler one than any other man's, I must conclude that wealth imparts a bird-lime quality to the possessor, at which the man in his native poverty would have revolted. What has led me to this, is the idea of such merit as Mr Allan [Ramsay] possesses, and such riches as a nabob and governor contractor possesses, and why they do not form a mutual league. Let wealth shelter and cherish unprotected merit, and the gratitude and celebrity of that merit will richly repay it."

3. *Some appreciation of religion, with a thorough detestation of hypocrisy.*—Two kirk elders were sitting together not a hundred miles from Dumfries. After passing the "*sneeshin*," one of them shook his head, saying, "D'ye ken the news?" "Nae," answered the other. "Burns was seen galloping hame drunk nobbut a few hours after sunrise. And there is mickle talk about his houghmagandie with Racer Jess. And folk do say that he's jibing into a blasphemer." The other kirk elder also shook his head, when all the circumstances were deliberated with such minuteness and precision, that fully three mutchkins of neat whisky were imbibed upon the occasion. That Burns did come home "some

wee short hour ayont the twal" in a partial state of intoxication is simply true; but he got fou' in respectable company. There was at that time a notorious rendezvous for *drabs* and *vagrants* kept by Poussie Nannie. Burns went there just once in his lifetime, and, no doubt, joined with gusto in the hilarity of the scene. Soon afterwards, he wrote the "Beggar's Opera," which certainly possesses more matter of fact than morality. But the mistake lies here, in ignorantly supposing that the visitor appreciated such scenes above all that is pure and noble. A great deal too much has been said about the follies and excesses of our poet. Cynics of stereotyped morality have employed unnecessary rhetoric to convince us, that had Burns been a better he would have been a happier man. It is so easy, and pleasant withal, to lecture upon others. "While there are circumstances over which we have little control," say they, "most of our troubles are made by ourselves; and Burns, if he had had more virtue and less *deboucherie*, he too would have mellowed his own path." Very true, and not to be gainsayed. We do not contend for the poet as a model of perfection; those who love him most would weep at the remembrance of his follies. To himself, these latter were frequently a source of bitter reflection; he did not conceal or palliate them before his Maker. Witness his plaintive confession,—

"Thou know'st that Thou hast formed me
With passions wild and strong;
And listening to their witching voice
Has often led me wrong."

And in his prayer in the "Prospect of Death,"—

"Fain would I say, 'Forgive my foul offence !'
Fain promise never more to disobey ;
But should my Author health again dispense,
Again I might desert fair Virtue's sway ;
Again exalt the brute and sink the man ;
Then how should I for heavenly mercy pray,
Who act so counter heavenly mercy's plan ?
Who sin so oft have mourn'd, yet to temptation ran !"

Still detractors said that Burns was not only tolerant of vice, but gloried in his shame; also, that he ridiculed holy things. It is false, he was simply true to himself, and let all the world see what was in him. He liked a drop of whisky, and sang its praise,—

"O whisky ! soul o' plays and pranks !"

He had no abhorrence of beer; nay, he liked that beverage too, and did not conceal his partiality,—

"And aye we'll taste the barley bree."

He also liked to kiss a bonny lass "coming through the rye." But in all these propensities there were hundreds of esteemed kirk-going men who quietly indulged a greater licence. And yet these were the first to lift up their pious hands in horror. Burns fared no better than many other gifted men. His genius made every movement in his life of public significance, and we know how the base, detracting, envious spirit of the world, "hating the excellence it cannot reach," is apt to look with jaundiced eyes upon objects which are healthy in themselves, making an enormity out of trifling things. There are, indeed, prodigies in the world who spring up, as it

were, out of a mist. Surreptitiously born, perhaps, in some back slum, these precocious children escape all individual observation from the mere obscurity of their origin. The world knows them, and futurity regards them simply as writers or public characters. True, in their passage through life, they may not altogether escape malignant inuendoes. Ill-natured critics will ask for a table of their pedigree, and even insinuate that from some lousy imp of sin comes the impostor of fame. But it was not Burns's fate to spring from any such equivocal parents; he was heir to a race—humble enough as regards material wealth—from whom manly purposes and moral virtues were publicly expected; and when by the simple power of genius he ennobled this class of Scottish worthies, every action of his daily walk was sedulously marked and commented upon.

The key is here: Mingled with some base passions, there were noble aspirations in that peasant son of a sterling father, for his songs struck a chord in tuneful hearts; there the appreciation was involuntary. But envy sprung up—that base product of little minds—and strove hard to trample down the individual fame into the dust. This roused those fiercer passions of the poet—pride, and contumely, and scorn. Then low-minded friends flattered, the praise of whom is a degradation.

We would not conceal the fact that Burns was often charged with scepticism. It is a serious matter when teachable souls lose all faith in the integrity of gospel teachers. Our poet never lost

his belief in Christianity, the honest expression and true reflex of which had been manifest in the "auld clay biggin" of his early years: those unsophisticated lessons of real piety did live with him for ever. Religion Burns always did reverence, but he had little veneration for "godly professionals,"—

"Wi' screw'd up grace-proud faces,"

and still less for professional spouters—"the lads in black." A poet cannot falsify his own experience, and it was evidently Burns's lot to meet with many canting, hypocritical scoundrels, whose only object, at any risk, was to serve self and temporal interests; preachers whose very breath, when speaking of honest men who would not condone their aims, was foul perjury and pollution. Almost might he doubt the special government of God that Deity should permit such blasphemous instruments to live, until, perhaps, he would call to mind the inspired words that "judgment is not executed speedily."

Much has been said, also, about the indelicacy which is to be found in his poems. Burns lived to regret that many of those brilliant, spontaneous effusions—with wit too ribald and corrupting words—were surreptitiously printed, or were circulating in manuscript far and wide amongst that class of readers who glory in impurity. It is known that once, when Burns sorely felt the need of money, a vile purveyor of literature offered him £50 for a collection of ribald songs. Of course the proposal was rejected with disgust. The man who contributed undying lyrics to his country's glory, and

scorned reward in pelf, was not likely thus to prostitute his genius, even when poverty might use constraint. I admit there are, even in some of Burns's acknowledged writings, many foul words, but the coarseness and vulgarity is mainly confined to the expression; the sentiment is honest, often elevated, but never polluted. These defects may frequently offend ears polite, but did they ever corrupt anybody? Not one. No, it is your smooth-tongued men who do the mischief, those who dress up vice in the garb of virtue, who charm and fascinate but to ensnare. Burns was a plain blunt man, and his daily lot was cast amongst a class not remarkable for refinement; it is no wonder, therefore, that this freedom of expression should occasionally manifest itself even in his poetic effusions.

IV. *Stern, manly independence.*—Burns from an early age gave his mind to learn great social and practical lessons. He looked narrowly at himself, his condition in life, and the relative positions of mankind. Calm thoughtful reflection on these topics provoked much honest indignation. Mankind he estimated according to their moral and intellectual worth; wealth, rank, social position, were to him like mere external trappings. With these principles he turned his thoughts inwards. He tested his own powers, weighed himself accurately, and saw that he had genius, and, with mental power, a heart full of benevolence, sympathies broad and deep. This estimation preserved him independent, and promoted, so far as concerns his native powers,

a steady and dignified self-respect. But he was born poor. That might be a misfortune, it was not his fault. To scorn and despise such is not only injustice to man, but an implied censure to the God who made him thus. Burns, however, did not estimate men by the length of their patrimonial domains; and like an honest man of genius, he never cowered before the purse-proud's gaze.

“Is there for honest poverty
That hangs his head, and a' that,
The coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that.
For a' that, and a' that,
Our toils obscure, and a' that;
The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man's the gowd for a that,” &c.

Would that every poor but honest man was baptized with a similar spirit! The distinctions among men would then arise from something better than uncertain riches. Animated by these principles, no wonder, as Burns looked abroad upon the world, his heart recoiled within him. He felt, because he experienced the evils of society; and he has recorded many a bitter but honest burst of indignation—

“See yonder poor o'er-laboured wight,
So abject, mean, and vile;
Who begs a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil—

(Oh! that line—it is stinging.)

And see his lordly fellow-worm
The poor petition spurn;
Unmindful though a weeping wife
And helpless offspring mourn.

If I'm design'd your lordling's slave,
By Nature's law design'd ;
Why was an independent wish
E'er planted in my mind ?
If not, why am I subject to
His cruelty and scorn ?
Or why has man the will and power
To make his fellow mourn ?"


Genius is not often stultified by outward troubles ; these more frequently aid its development. The men of an easy life are usually those who rust out, for, as a spur to action, even grinding poverty is better than luxurious ease. If we look at the main-spring of success in our foremost men, we shall usually find that it is ambition—a desire to become personally great, or publicly recognised. Burns contrasted the condition of his early lot with the aspirations of his own soul, and soon found out that they did not fit, that the situation jarred. A train of reasoning like this would go on in his mind : We are here to till the soil ; true, and the first law of nature is to find food for the belly. But the life is more than meat. Then would recur the lessons taught daily in that "auld clay biggin," how the chief concern is to fulfil our duty in this world so as to satisfy the conscience, and get a preparedness for the life to come. May not that man be esteemed by Heaven, when righteously working at his menial toil, equally with the righteous men of wealth and influence ? Our poet said, No, it were a libel upon God's ordained law of progress to admit this. As well may we say that any simple condition of ex-

perience is equally good with the highest, and that *excelsior* is humbug. The mind has divine impulses for progress, and that man who strives most to attain excellence, be it from no higher motive than personal distinction, is better than he who rests with thankfulness in a low estate.

Success did come, in a measure and of a kind sufficient to gladden the noblest of men; those poems of his yielded what well might seem to Burns a splendid income. But their reproduction could not be reckoned upon with the regularity of clock-work, while every day brings daily wants; so the poet resolved to get into some common-place way of earning a livelihood. Perhaps if he had devoted his energies solely to agriculture—a business he understood well,—and taken a good farm, the pecuniary result would have been complete satisfaction. But we often value least those spheres of duty and profit for which we are best adapted. After all, Burns was rather a dreamer than a worker; but he was naturally hopeful, and to him there always appeared a bright vista into some other sphere beyond his own. The profession of gauger or exciseman seemed to our poet the most feasible which he could obtain, although the salary (£50 per annum) was small enough for a beginning. But Burns felt hopeful that a man of his public mark would not be allowed to remain long in the subordinate ranks; there was the supervisor's degree, with from £200 to £300 per annum, and the collector's situation with a salary of about £200 more. Be-

sides all this, there was the comfortable assurance "when banes are craz'd and bluid is thin," of a pension, which would always place him above the reach of care and want. Here the question will recur—Why was not Burns successful in his business pursuits? Besides what profit the farm at Ellisland might yield, he filled the office of exciseman; while for aught we know to the contrary, his duties as gauger were ever conscientiously and correctly performed. How is it that promotion came not from the excise, and that farming did not succeed? We all know that a poor man seldom does succeed when his attention is much divided. And yet here was Burns looking after smugglers (no sinecure in those days) rooting out illicit distilleries, or fraudulent vendors of drink, superintending a poor stony farm, and doing a life's work of poetry at the same time. Was all this as nothing to a man of genius? If amidst such struggling the best impulses of our nature are not obliterated or degraded, but thrive by the "rude concussion of the storm," then is the discipline profitable in a better sense than yielding temporary pelf. But there were other causes which obstructed an easy current of success. Dr Johnson's liking for "a good hater," ought not, perhaps, to be hastily condemned, for the smirking, emotionless acquiescence, which passes for good breeding, is really nothing better than educated hypocrisy, often devoid of all truth and manliness. But the man who speaks out what he thinks, not unfrequently suffers for his honesty. Whether Burns's impulsive

nature, quick to take offence and ready to lampoon, had not much to do with his subsequent neglect, may be worth a moment's consideration. Ever sensible to kindness, and ready to acknowledge his own faults when occasion required, he was still implacable to those who offended his pride. There have been many in higher social positions who could sacrifice, not only their own private convictions, but the best interests of their town or nation, to revenge a personal offence. These are your cold blooded plotters who mask their designs and bide their time. Burns's prompt and open retaliation showed equally the honesty with the imprudence of his character. Take another, and more ordinary type of humanity—the rigidly orthodox who are very courteous to the object whom they wish to degrade. These would naturally view the poet's free, outspoken sentiments, not only with suspicion, but with positive distaste. Hear the tutor of moral etiquette:—"It is perfectly right to enter our solemn protest against everything mean, and servile, and base, but while we are firm we should be prudent. Burns's violent outbursts of indignation are very injudicious. The world sneers and says, 'This is mere braggadocio, the fanfaronade of independence.' But, further, Burns, by this foolish boasting, shows very little respect for the feelings of his patrons. To the public who read his works, it is ungenerous; to the rich and great, who deigned to stoop from their exalted position and notice the humble ploughman, it is uncourteous; while to his



personal friends, those who were his greatest benefactors, it is both ungrateful and unjust." All this and more has been said in reproach of our poet; but it is a base libel. Where can we look for more devoted attachment, more tender remembrances, than are to be found in his poetic epistles? And yet, for all this, Burns was as little encumbered as most men living by obligation. One would scarcely think so to hear his own confession,—

“The bridegroom may forget the bride
Was made his wedded wife yestreen;
The monarch may forget the crown
That on his head an hour has been;
The mother may forget the child
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee:
But I’ll remember thee, Glencairn,
And a’ that thou hast done fa’ me.”

What was it that the noble Earl Glencairn, the Dukes of Gordon and Athole, Earl Buchan, or any other of his aristocratic patrons did for Burns? They invited him occasionally to their houses, and, may be, praised his poems, or spoke a word of encouragement to the honest bard; but except lionising him with a few dinners and wine, he received no substantial favours, except once—the Earl of Eglinton sent ten guineas for a few copies of his poems, which sum Burns would have reduced to the price of the volumes and returned the balance, had it not appeared invidious. I mention these things not to censure the patrons alluded to; in his prosperity they did all that Burns required, and probably as much as he would have submitted to

receive, only let not anybody run away with the idea that, with a strong spirit of independence, our poet was secretly participating in the great man's bounty.

There is yet another class of critics who find fault with Burns's high-toned independency of spirit, not because it was an injustice to the public, but an injury to himself; and here I am free to confess that their strictures are not without truth. Burns's repugnance toward incurring obligation amounted almost to a disease; and, no doubt, stood greatly in the way of his personal and pecuniary advancement. He refused the offer of fifty-two guineas per annum for a weekly contribution to the "poets' corner" in a London newspaper. He obstinately refused all remuneration for his valuable contributions, or participation of profit in works which his own genius alone rendered productive. It was in 1792, when Burns had attained the zenith of his fame, that Mr G. Thompson, and one or two others, projected a complete edition of national Scottish airs. Such a publication was justly felt to be a want of the times. An obstacle, however, presented itself,—the music was to some extent all that could be desired, but the old words were for the most part commonplace, and often contemptible. To secure a collection of lyrical pieces worthy the airs, Mr Thompson wrote to Burns, imploring aid in the undertaking. He proceeds: "We will esteem your poetical assistance a particular favour, besides paying any reasonable price you shall please

to demand for it. Profit is quite a secondary consideration with us, and we are resolved to spare neither pains nor expense on the publication." Burns's true character shines forth in his reply,—

"SIR,—I have just this moment got your letter. As the request you make will positively add to my enjoyments in complying with it, I shall enter into your undertaking with all the small portion of abilities I have, strained to their utmost exertion by the impulse of enthusiasm."

Then, after a few remarks upon the nature and duties of the undertaking, he concludes,—

"As to any remuneration, you may think my songs either above or below price, for they shall absolutely be the one or the other. In the honest enthusiasm with which I embark in your undertaking, to talk of money, wages, fee, hire, &c., would be downright prostitution of soul!"

Some time after this, when our bard had enriched the collection with some of the finest songs in the language, we find Mr Thompson thus addressing him,—

"I cannot express how much I am obliged to you for the exquisite new songs you are sending me; but thanks, my friend, are a poor return for what you have done; as I shall be benefited by the publication, you must suffer me to inclose a small mark of my gratitude, and to repeat it afterwards when I find it convenient. Do not return it, for by Heaven if you do, our correspondence is at an end; and though this would be no loss to you, it would mar the publication, which, under your auspices, cannot fail to be respectable and interesting."

The reader will anticipate the character of Burns's reply,—

"I assure you, my dear sir, that you truly hurt me with your pecuniary parcel. It degrades me in my own eyes. However, to return it would savour of affectation ; but as to any more traffic of that debtor-and-creditor kind, I swear by that honour which crowns the upright statue of Robert Burns's integrity, on the least motion of it, I will indignantly spurn the by-past transaction, and from that moment commence entire stranger to you. Burns's character for generosity of sentiment and independence of mind will, I trust, long outlive any of his wants which the cold unfeeling ore can supply ; at least, I will take care that such a character he shall deserve."

Like other men of plain speech, our poet did not escape scot-free of the base and dominant in office. At one time he was very near losing the support of his family from a manly avowal of his sentiments. It was while plodding his humble calling as a gauger or exciseman, that the stirring events took place which ushered in the French Revolution. Burns, like many other ardent hopeful minds, welcomed the shadow with high expectation. It was a pleasant dream for the poet to picture the spur to genius, the reward of merit, peace and prosperity, with an honest aspiring people liberated from the fangs of a sordid and debased oligarchy. He saw, or thought he saw, a crushed, toilworn, despised people rising into men, and sharing the comforts as well as the hardships of God's good world ; and he might say to France, although she did not hear him, "Courage, brothers ; plant your foot firmly on the neck of your oppressors." Such an ebullition might be pardoned for the noble enthusiasm which inspired it, springing as it did from

a feeling of humanity, a sense of justice, a burning hatred of wrong; but it was not. There were persons malicious enough to report his unguarded expressions, doubtless with much exaggeration, to the Commissioners of Excise; and, had it not been for the intervention of one or two powerful friends, he would have been dismissed from his office. As it was, he was narrowly watched, threatened, and given to understand that his promotion was not only deferred, but made contingent upon his future conduct. To add to his chagrin the rumour spread that Burns was already dismissed; when one gentleman proposed a subscription to relieve his wants; others said he conciliated the Board by a weak and unmanly recantation. It is true he appealed to the Commissioners, but it was to justify his conduct, not to compromise his principles and eat his words, although he could not withhold the bitter reflection that his enemies might construe the apology. The state of his mind under these circumstances may be gathered from a letter which he addressed to the gentleman who had generously proposed the subscription :—

“The partiality of my countrymen has brought me forward as a man of genius, and has given me a character to support. In the poet I have avowed manly and independent sentiments, which I hope have been found in the man. Reasons of no less weight than the support of a wife and children have pointed out my present occupation as the only eligible line of life within my reach. Still my honest fame is my dearest concern, and a thousand times have I trembled at the idea of the degrading epithets that

malice or misrepresentation may affix to my name. Often in blasting anticipation have I listened to some future hackney scribbler, with the heavy malice of savage stupidity, exultingly assert that Burns, after having been held up to public view and to public estimation as a man of some genius, yet quite destitute of resources within himself to support his borrowed dignity, dwindled into a paltry exciseman, and slunk out the rest of his insignificant existence in the meanest of pursuits, and among the lowest of mankind. In your illustrious hand, sir, permit me to lodge my strong disavowal and defiance of such slanderous falsehoods. Burns was a poor man from his birth, and an exciseman by necessity ; but—I will say it ! the sterling of his honest worth, poverty could not debase ; and his independent British spirit, oppression might bend, but could not subdue.”

We should like to throw a veil over the closing period of Burns’s life, for it is marked by suffering and sin. From the time of that unhappy collision with the excise, his habits became more irregular, while his health began rapidly to decline. He drank to drown reflection, and then, when the prestige of his great genius seemed to avail him nothing, when one after another of his rich patrons disowned him, he plunged deeper in vice, and chose for his companions some of the lowest and most dissipated of our race. Then came poverty like an armed man. For many weary months it was plainly seen that Burns was “wearing awa,” and every “neibo Scot” might have known that want would come when there was no strength to labour. It says little for the generous impulse of a country that her greatest bard should perish from neglect, and die in poverty. No untoward circumstances, no delinquencies or

lapses of depravity in the object—should even such exist—can palliate national ingratitude. With health and strength Burns had indeed been nobly independent, but true kindness always melted his heart; and now, in his greatest need, adversity had stifled pride. His sufferings must have been keen, or he never would have been impelled to write that letter to Mr Thompson—

“After all my boasted independence, curst necessity compels me to implore you for five pounds. A cruel —— of a haberdasher, to whom I owe an account, taking it into his head that I am dying, has commenced a process, and will infallibly put me into jail. Do, for God’s sake! send me that sum, and that by return of post. I do not ask all this gratuitously; for upon returning health I hereby promise and engage to furnish you with five pounds’ worth of the neatest song genius you have seen.”

Perhaps he little thought at the time that in ten days that dream of songs would give place to a funeral dirge. It may be that the nation of Scotland would not have permitted a haberdasher to make Burns’s death-bed in a jail. Mr Thompson sent the five pounds—no more, and no less;—but it is not on record that anybody else contributed anything. Mr Thompson advanced just what was asked for on loan, although he had received from Burns gratuitously, songs which afterwards yielded hundreds of pounds. But we must not think too hardly of the gentleman in question; had he not offered payment at a time when he knew that it would be refused? Now, perhaps, he is short of cash; indeed it was said afterwards that Thompson had to

borrow the five pounds off Cunningham, a *mutual friend*. Speaking of friends, even the chosen few, with whom he had taken sweet counsel, appeared to forsake him when he stood face to face with penury and death, to some of whom Burns wrote pleadingly for “auld lang syne,” but received no answer. Acting on medical advice he went to Brow, for sea-bathing, but soon returned home rather enfeebled than restored, and while his hand had just strength to guide the pen, he thus wrote to his father-in-law, between whom and himself there never existed much sympathy:—

“MY DEAR SIR,—Do for heaven’s sake send Mrs Armour here immediately. My wife is hourly expected to be put to bed. Good God! what a situation for her to be in, poor girl, without a friend! I returned from sea-bathing quarters to-day; and my medical friends would almost persuade me that I am better; but I think and feel that my strength is so gone, that the disorder will prove fatal to me.—Your Son-in-law,
R. B.”

This was his last earthly indite, and like all those final heart-breaking appeals, failed to elicit a suitable response. To Burns the reflection would be terrible that he had outlived the period of human friendship. But we forget—one good, sympathising woman, an exciseman’s daughter, dutifully attended him in his last moments. His children were brought in by humble yet kind neighbours, to console him in his last moments, if they could, and have filial remembrances engraved upon their susceptible minds. His wife, much sinned against,

and yet much loved, was not permitted to catch his last breath, and smooth his dying pillow, for she lay in another bed under circumstances which might endanger both her life and the infant's. What a situation for Scotland's immortal bard! that cheerless ending of his physical existence. And yet the poet and father could not stultify his better nature, and was not ordained to part with life in vague unconsciousness. Death is a sad, a solemn thing under all circumstances, for we then learn around how many objects and earthly associations the tendrils of sympathy are bound. Moreover, there is such a dreariness in the sound of that final farewell. "I shall look round this room once more," the dying soul says,—“I shall just look round this room once more, and then all will vanish for ever. That sun which shines so brightly, which has cheered me so often, will gleam a moment longer; and then I shall be totally insensible to its influence. And those dearest of all ties, the ties of kin—my children who have solaced affliction by their sympathy and prattle, I shall just trace the lineaments of their features once more, and catch the sound of their sobbing, and then I shall die.” The grief our poet felt in death was not alone that such tender associations were being severed, but that he was leaving a family, of whom he was always passionately fond, to struggle behind with hardship and poverty. This natural anxiety embittered his closing hours. Happily for the survivors those fears were never realised. The widowed

Jean gave birth to a son at the very time when a vast procession followed its father to the grave. But the care for Burns's five children now became a national duty. Assistance multiplied, while successive editions of those matchless poems yielded a profit of nearly one thousand pounds. An awakened public made up in generosity to his family what they owed to the bard.

THE END.

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